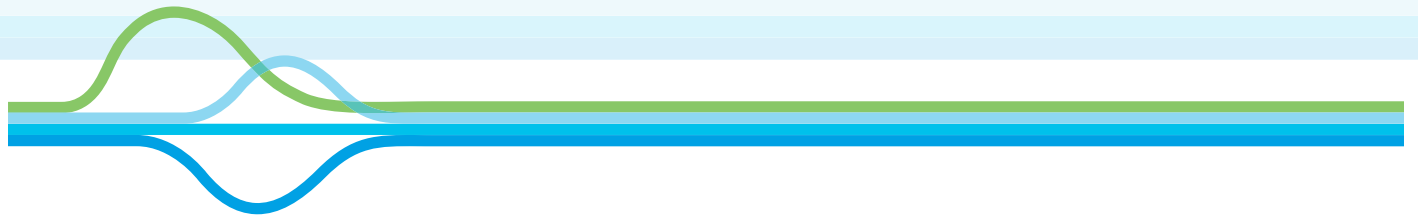


# Early Childhood Flexibility Practices and Patterns

# Report 2014



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children



## About Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been a voice for young children since 1938. We are the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood sector. ECA advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

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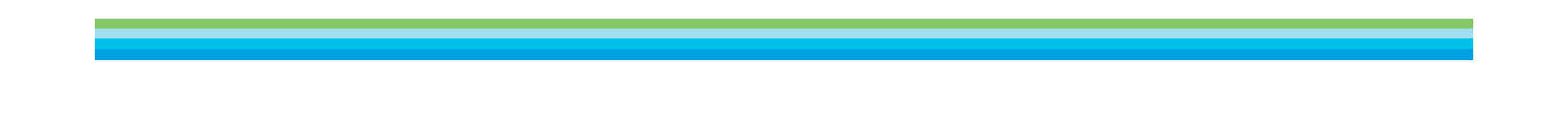
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# Introduction

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) was funded in partnership with the Commonwealth Government, Department of Education to examine early childhood flexibility practices and patterns in Australia.

The project was designed to:

- highlight how exemplar services operate and function
- analyse factors contributing to and barriers restricting operators being able to increase flexibility through the analysis of community settings, financial structures and staffing arrangements
- examine the attributes of organisations that may contribute to the capacity for adopting flexible approaches
- identify external influencing factors such as competition in the region, local workforce trends, relationships between services and between services and local employers.

This Report is part of the final component of the project, and highlights recommendations and future directions for early childhood education and care services in providing flexible arrangements for their families and local communities.

The contents of the Report are illustrated through case studies, as well as data from surveys of early childhood services.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government or officers of the Department of Education.

# Executive summary

The Early childhood flexibility practices and patterns report highlights recommendations and future directions for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in providing flexible arrangements for families and local communities.

The Report was informed through sector surveys, interviews with early childhood services and a Reference Group of sector leaders.

Children's interests are a paramount consideration when considering flexible practice. The stability, quality, and intensity of early childhood services are all relevant when considering children's interests, as well as children's wishes. Children may also benefit from flexibility in some circumstances. Putting children's interests into practice may include considering children's rights and identifying and treating risks associated with flexible approaches.

Flexibility in early childhood services also should be placed in the context of family flexibility and workplace flexibility which also contribute to parents' workforce participation. In this Report, the approach to flexibility in early childhood services has been broad, and includes both workforce participation objectives as well as the broader needs of the family. Models of flexible practice include not only extended operating hours but flexible location, flexible sessions and enrolment patterns as well as early childhood services offering a broader set of family support services and partnerships.

There are links between flexible practices and the *National Quality Standard (NQS)*, including Collaborative partnerships with families and communities (NQS Area 6), Relationships with children (NQS Area 5) and Leadership and service management (NQS Area 7). These links provide cause for services to reflect on flexibility in the context of quality improvement of their services.

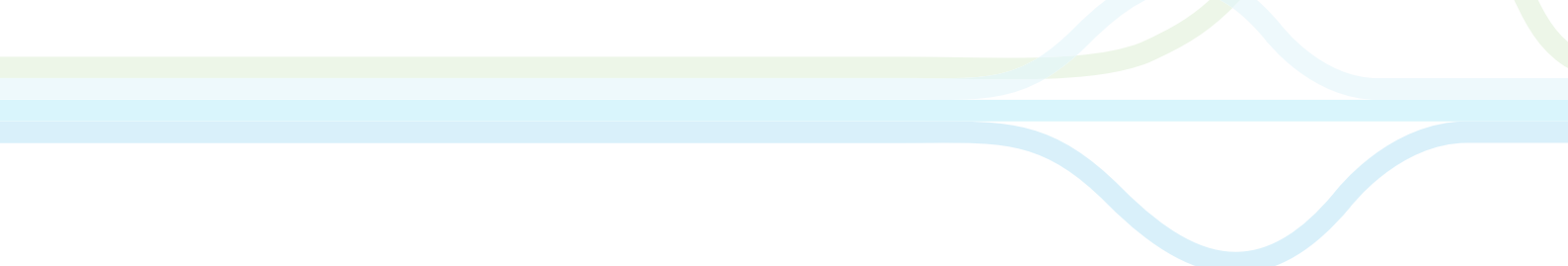
The attributes of flexible services may help to support flexible practice. The stability and consistency of attendance of families, and flexibility in early childhood programming, are important enablers of flexible early childhood practices reported by services. Some service types may show inherent flexibility, like in-home care and family day care, particularly in providing care after hours. Technology use may also support services to implement flexible practice.

Early childhood services may encounter barriers to flexible practice. Lack of demand, workforce issues and related costs were particular challenges. Local government regulations, as well as leadership and management capabilities were also barriers to flexible practices.

Some early childhood services provide extended hours of care, especially in family day care and in-home care, with some educators offering 24 hours care. Long day care services and outside school hours care services were less flexible in terms of their opening hours, with few services open past 6.30 pm. Removal of local government restrictions on opening hours may help to improve flexibility in this area.

Flexible sessions were also offered by some services, utilising the existing provisions under Family Assistance Law. Changes to enrolment were also offered by early childhood services. With the exception of outside school hours care and in-home care, most services were not flexible in relation to changes to bookings at short notice. High levels of utilisation may make it difficult for services to offer flexible sessions and enrolment.





The location of early childhood services may also provide flexibility for families. While most outside school hours care services are located with schools, only small numbers of long day care and other services were located with schools and businesses. The development of underutilised land targeted at early childhood education and care (ECEC) may help to improve the availability of co-located services. Reducing the complexity of incentives for on-site services in the workplace would also provide additional flexibility, benefiting parents.

To meet the broader needs of families, early childhood services also formed partnerships with a range of community services including health, child protection and other early childhood services. A key area of flexible practice is inclusiveness and there is further work to be done in embedding inclusive practice within the sector.

Family day care and in-home care services are more likely to cater for shift workers and parents with changing work hours. This suggests that these care types might provide particular opportunities to improve early childhood flexibility in the future.

# Consultation with early childhood services

## Reference Group

A Reference Group of sector leaders was convened to provide input and advice to the project and the Early childhood flexibility practices and patterns report.

**Table 1. Early childhood flexibility practices and patterns reference group members**

Ms	Samantha Page (Chair)	CEO	Early Childhood Australia
Ms	Kelly Hand	Senior Research Fellow	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Mr	Michael Farrell	National Research and Advocacy Manager	Family Day Care Australia
Ms	Robyn Monro-Miller	CEO	Network of Outside School Hours Services Association
Ms	Monique Beange	CEO	General Manager, Early Childhood Education.
Ms	Jackie Gambrell	Strategic Advisor	Goodstart Early Learning
Professor	Barbara Pocock	Director	Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia
Ms	Georgina Dimitrakis	Director	Creative Play Childcare & Early Learning Centre
Ms	Sara Hinchley	Senior Manager	Child Australia

## Service visits

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) undertook visits to early childhood services to speak directly with providers about flexible practices. ECA visited 25 services across all states and territories (except the Northern Territory) including services in metropolitan and regional and remote areas.

Many of these visits are recorded through case studies provided in the Report.

## Sector survey

To support the Early childhood flexibility practices and patterns report, ECA also conducted an online sector-wide survey of early childhood education and care services in January and February 2014. The survey identifies the range of flexible practices being implemented by early childhood services to meet the needs of families and is referred to throughout the Report. Estimates derived from the survey approach

are based on data from a sample of providers. Therefore, the conclusions that can be drawn from the aggregate results are limited by the quality and representativeness of the sample data.

The survey was distributed to all approved early childhood services. Stand-alone kindergarten and preschool services and other services were also included in the survey to provide context, though these services are not the focus of the Report.

Self-selection bias can be expected by services completing the survey that have an interest in flexible practice. Therefore, the survey data does not allow for a precise quantification of the level of flexibility in place in services across the sector or as a proportion of all service provision.

The focus of the approach is to identify where services are implementing flexible practice, what practices have been used, and to gauge the interest of services in adopting flexible practice into the future.

## Distribution of services

**Table 2. Number of survey respondents by service type**

Surveys were conducted covering the breadth of approved service types.

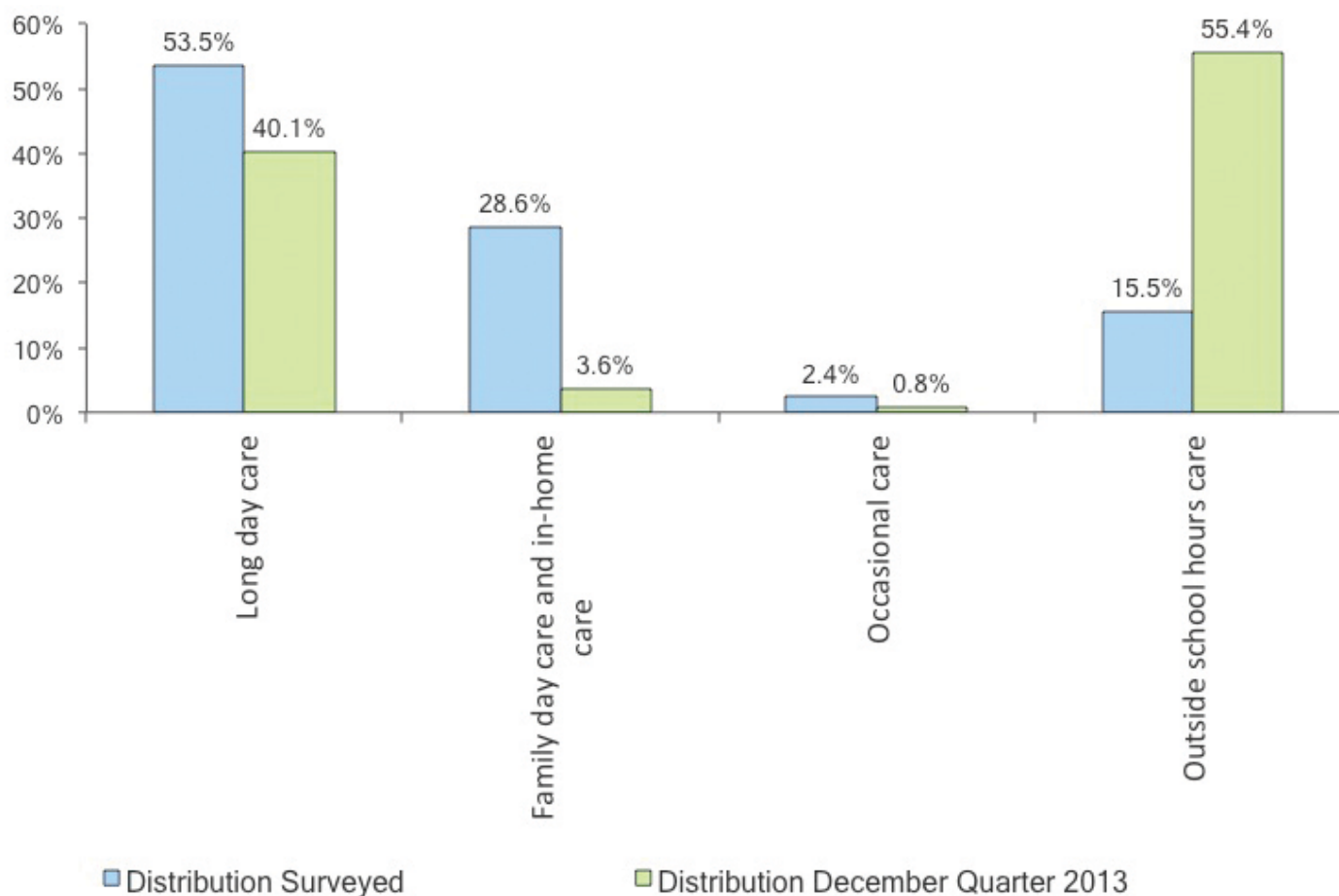
<b>SURVEY</b>	<b>RESPONSES</b>	<b>PROPORTION OF TOTAL</b>
Long day care and other services	405	44.3%
Family day care educator services	131	14.3%
Family day care coordination units	62	6.8%
Outside school hours care	120	13.1%
In-home care	25	2.7%
Kindergartens/preschools	238	26.0%
Other services	45	4.9%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>914</b>	

Note that some services are licensed for multiple service types. These are not double-counted in the total. The response rate of all approved child care services approached by ECA to complete the flexibility surveys was 4.8 per cent.

Family day care and in-home care services were overrepresented. This may suggest that there was selection bias amongst these services. Conversely, Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services were underrepresented in the survey sample.

There are some inconsistencies in the distribution of services in the sample compared with the distribution of services across states and territories reported in *Child Care and Early Learning in Summary December Quarter 2013* (Department of Education, 2014, p. 7).

**Table 3. Distribution of approved early childhood education and care services**



## The literature on children’s interests

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the ‘Convention’ or ‘UNCRC’) requires consideration of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (United Nations, 1989).

The literature on children’s development and interests helps to provide context for early childhood services and policy makers in approaching flexibility in early childhood education and care. Not all flexible models of ECEC may be in children’s interests. Consideration of children’s interests provides a foundation for flexible practice by ensuring that these interests are taken into account by service providers.

Several key interests emerge in the literature on children’s interests.

## Stable relationships

The stability of relationships in early childhood education and care is considered to be critically important in the socioemotional and cognitive development in early childhood (AAP/APHA, 2002). According to Shonkoff (2000), ‘[t]he developmental effects of child care depend on its safety, the opportunities it provides for nurturing and stable relationships, and its provision of linguistically and cognitively rich environments’.

The stability of child care providers appears to be particularly important for young children’s social development, an association that is attributable to the attachments that are established between young children and more stable providers (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 314).

There are several types of stable relationships. There is long-term continuity in care shown in staff turnover rate, time with primary caregiver, and the length of time children spend with the same peers (De Schipper, 2003, p. 302). The daily stability of the child's experience in staffing and grouping patterns in a given day in an ECEC service is also relevant (Morrissey, 2008).

Children in multiple care arrangements can demonstrate lower language development, social competence, and behavioural control (Morrissey, 2008). However, research also shows that a combination of high-quality ECEC, such as preschool and home based care, did not adversely affect children's cognitive outcomes (Gordon et.al, 2013, p. 931).

The OECD suggests that the continuity of children's experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff-members exchange regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation; daily routines, child development and learning (OECD, 2007, p. 65).



## Quality early childhood education and care

The evidence indicates that staff-to-child ratios and the qualifications of staff are critical structural matters underpinning high-quality early childhood programs with consequent improved learning, developmental and health outcomes for children (Kennedy, 2013).

The OECD suggests that analysis of access to early childhood services should take into account the 'appropriateness and quality of access' (OECD, 2006, p. 77). That is, questioning 'are the basic quality indicators—staff ratios; group size; the qualifications levels and certification of the educators, the quality of materials and environments—respected for all children in the services to which access is offered? Is access appropriate for children requiring special support?' (OECD, 2006, p. 77). 'Are services flexible, yet suited to the needs of young children (not merely "slot" services but environments where children are cared for by trained professionals able to offer a sustained developmental programme)?'

There is sound evidence from research that the ratio of staff to children makes a positive difference in early childhood programs and particularly for children from birth to three years of age. Infants and toddlers do not thrive in environments where their need for individualised, responsive attention and attachment with caring, consistent educators is compromised because there are insufficient skilled adults to meet these critical needs. Research also indicates that the level of sensitive, responsive care for infants and toddlers decreases when the ratio of staff to children is decreased (NICHD, 2000).

Research is unequivocal on the link between staff qualifications and training, and improved outcomes for children in early childhood education and care programs (Kennedy, 2013). A comprehensive review of the literature on *Determinants of quality in child care* (Huntsman, 2008 p. iii) concluded that across age groups and service settings 'the most significant factor affecting quality appears to be caregiver education, qualifications, and training'. In addition, there are less reportable child accidents or serious incidents when educators with higher qualifications are employed (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

Quality may act as a 'protective factor' mitigating the 'risk burden' which may accrue through flexible early childhood practices (Biddle & Seth-Purdie, 2014, p. 61). However, flexibility is not necessarily a trade-off for quality (Emlen, 2010, p. 72). In fact, flexibility may contribute to quality. *Starting Strong II* makes specific reference to the 'operational quality' of early childhood

services which includes how services provide 'flexible and appropriate (for children) opening hours and the integration of core programming with other necessary services, e.g. out-of-school provision, social and medical services; arrangements for special needs children' (OECD, 2006, p. 128).

Emlen (2010) found that there is a positive correlation between flexibility of early childhood services and the quality of early childhood services accessed by families. 'The quality of care parents want happens when they have the flexibility they need, and low quality happens when they lack flexibility.'

## Childcare usage

The number of hours used, or the 'intensity of child care', may affect children's outcomes in early childhood education and care services. Analysis from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) shows that low and medium childcare use (up to 28 hours per week) is associated with better children's outcomes compared to other levels of usage. However, the Institute found no significant negative effects from using any level of childcare (hours) compared to not using childcare.

'... there are no significant negative effects from using any level of childcare compared to not using childcare. The estimated effects are either positive or zero' (Houng, Jeon & Kalb, 2011, p. 6). In terms of early learning, children with medium childcare use have better outcomes than children with patterns of either low or high childcare use (Houng, Jeon & Kalb, 2011, p. 6). Sylva et al. (2004) found a positive effect of duration in preschool (starting from the age of two years) on cognitive development, but full-time attendance did not improve development more than part-time attendance.

A significant association was found between hours of attendance and low scores on maths, literacy and self-rated school adjustment (Biddle & Seth-Purdie, 2014, p. 3).

In relation to non-cognitive outcomes, childcare in general has no effect compared with parental care, but high childcare use (over 30 hours per week) negatively

affects children's non-cognitive outcomes (Datta Gupta & Simonsen, 2010, p. 1). Children who spend many hours show more behaviour problems and greater incidents of minor illness than those in fewer hours of child care (NICHD, 2006, p. 17).

In relation to the level of ECEC usage per day, studies have found increased levels of cortisol over the day for children in long day care for extended hours (Dettling, Gunnar, & Donzella, 1999), this increase in cortisol levels was not found in children attending day care only for half-days (Gunnar, Tout, de Haan, Pierce, & Stansbury, 1997).



## Children's wishes

While the literature and policy regarding flexible child care has often concentrated on the risks and needs of children in ECEC services, it has been suggested that children also have a legitimate role as active users with wishes that may be taken into account in the formulation of child care services (Gunnar, 1997, p. 84).

The Convention also provides that:

*... the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

## Benefits for children from flexible child care

It has been suggested that child care programs, for example, that focus both on children's needs and parents' needs may have an advantage over programs that exclusively focus on child development goals because these arrangements may be longer-lasting. 'That is, to the extent that arrangements are more responsive to parents' work demands, parents may have an easier time using the arrangement consistently and maintaining it over time' (Bromer, 2009, p. 284).

A stable ECEC arrangement may also cause less interruption in employment than might normally be expected, which may have a broader impact on family's socioeconomic position (Lowe & Weisner, 2001).

**Recommendation 1: Early childhood services and policy makers should make the interests of children a paramount consideration when implementing flexible practices or policies supporting greater flexibility in early childhood settings.**

# Flexible child care and work and family constraints

Early childhood flexibility may also be placed in the context of both the workforce and family arrangements. Childcare flexibility, workplace flexibility and family flexibility are all part of a 'puzzle' in balancing workforce participation with child rearing responsibilities (Emlen, 2010, p. 106) (OECD, 2016, p. 207).

Workplace flexibility refers to the policy and laws supporting family responsibilities while at work.

## Workplace flexibility

(Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 239)

- changing the hours of work (for example, working part time or changing start or finish times)
- changing patterns of work (for example, working split shifts, or job sharing)
- changing the place of work (for example, working from home)
- using leave arrangements including paid parental leave
- adopting specific occupational health and safety measures (for example, for pregnant employees)
- applying specific employer supports such as for ECEC (for example, employers providing onsite childcare or reserving places in a childcare centre).

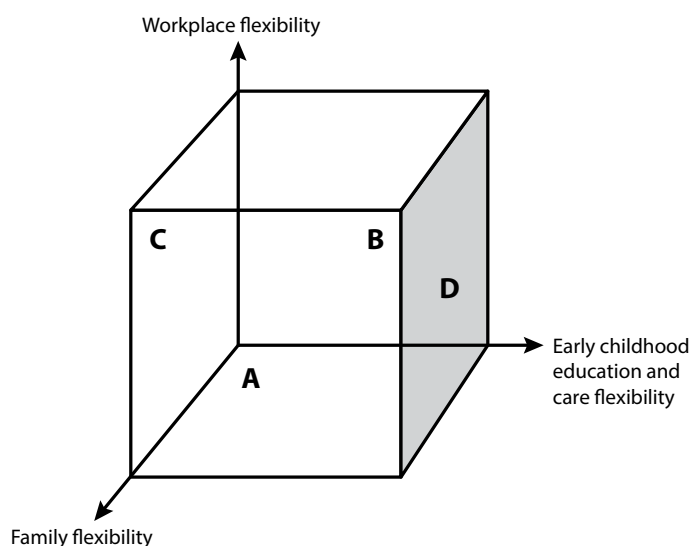
Flexible workplace arrangements may be used to meet ECEC obligations including picking up and dropping off children in formal or informal child care settings (Skinner & Pocock, 2011, p. 74). This is reflected in studies of shift workers which show that the greatest reason to request flexible workplace

arrangements by parents of preschool children was to meet the child care needs of children.

Alternatively, flexible childcare arrangements may assist parents in workplaces which are inflexible or where workplace flexibility is employer-centred. Employer-centred flexible arrangements may disrupt care arrangements, forcing parents to seek more flexible childcare alternatives (Nowak et al, 2013, p. 188).

Family flexibility refers to family capacity and the availability of relatives in relation to care giving responsibilities. This may include financial flexibility, the capacity of the family to afford flexible child care or their capacity otherwise to reduce working hours, and therefore reduce their income, to meet care responsibilities (Emlen, 2010, p. 86).

**Table 4. The flexibility trade-off**



- A = Low flexibility on all dimensions
- B = High flexibility in workplace, family and childcare flexibility
- C = Low childcare flexibility but high workplace and family flexibility
- D = Low family flexibility, and medium workplace flexibility but high childcare flexibility



As Table 4 shows, 'parents compensate for a shortage of flexibility in one area of life by finding an abundance of it in another, if they can'. (Emlen, 2010, p. 42)

The degree of flexibility in workplace and family arrangements varies (Baxter & Alexander, 2008, p. 66) putting pressure on child care services to be more flexible. Without enough flexibility across work, family or childcare, workforce participation is more difficult for families with children, and particularly women.

**Excerpt from the *Productivity Commission draft report into child care and early childhood learning* (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 57)**

#### **Draft Finding 6.5**

The workforce participation of mothers of children aged under 15 years is affected by the costs and availability of suitable childcare. It is also affected by the preferences of parents to look after their own (particularly very young) children, which in turn can be affected by such factors as the stresses of managing paid work and unpaid work at home. Other important determinants of mothers' workforce participation are the provision of flexible work and other family-friendly arrangements by employers, long-term career prospects and the effective marginal tax rates facing mothers.

#### **Draft Recommendation 6.1**

The Fair Work Ombudsman, and employer and employee associations should trial innovative approaches to:

- increase awareness about the 'right to request flexible work arrangements' and individual flexibility arrangements under the Fair Work Act 2009 and National Employment Standards
- promote positive attitudes among employers, employees and the wider community towards parents, particularly fathers, taking up flexible work and other family-friendly arrangements.

## **Childcare flexibility as a response to workforce constraints**

Families will make the best child care decision for their family based on the range of flexible options available to them and constraints on workplace flexibility and family flexibility (Emlen, 2010, p. 63). Particular inflexible workforce constraints include (Meyers, 1993, p. 581; Larner, 1994):

- long or extended hours
- non-standard hours
- part-time work
- rotating rosters including shift work
- rural/remote work
- long commute times between home and work.

The difficulty in finding an effective child care solution exacerbated by other factors including but not limited to (Larner, 1994; Bihan & Martin, 2004, p. 581; Caruso, 1992, p. 557):

- the non-availability of quality early childhood education and care
- the non-availability of kith or kin care
- single parenthood
- low income
- disability
- accommodation of sibling care arrangements.

A range of the complex factors listed contribute to each family's ECEC decisions. As a result, it is difficult to be precise about how flexible forms of ECEC can help to meet the needs of families. For example Breunig and Gong (2010) examined the price elasticity of partnered women's labour force supply. They did not examine accessibility issues, although these were acknowledged as an important factor in participation decisions.

Davidoff (2007) identifies the possibility that 'unmet consumer preferences represent more of a problem for parents than access issues, like flexibility. Unmet preferences can result from a wide range of factors,

and legitimately include a range of those above—service and program type, level of quality, location and hours.

General correlations can be made about certain cohorts of families and the flexibility they may require. This may help to provide context for services looking at implementing flexible models targeting specific cohorts of parents. For example Vanden Heuvel (1996) notes that women shift-workers and casual part-timers are more likely to use informal care.



## Flexibility in early childhood education and care

Flexibility in early childhood is broad and may refer to several crosscutting concepts, including:

- meeting the workforce participation or training needs of families
- pedagogical or internal flexibility—the flexibility of early learning programs including how these respond to children’s learning interests and needs
- financial flexibility including the affordability of services for families wishing to access ECEC
- meeting broader family support needs (which may not be related to workforce participation).

For the purposes of this Report, flexible early childhood services refers to approved early childhood services that meet the objectives of providing quality early childhood education and care for children and meeting the workforce participation needs of families and the broader needs of families.

While pedagogical or financial flexibility are not a focus, they are considered insofar as they affect flexibility for workforce participation, training and family support. For example, the flexibility of early learning programs may have a flow-on effect of allowing greater flexibility of sessions or enrolment patterns, benefiting parents. In relation to financial flexibility, a family’s limited capacity to pay may also restrict what options they have in accessing flexible ECEC, particularly for single parents or families with lower incomes.

ECEC flexibility also links closely with the notion of availability and two issues are often considered together as ‘ECEC accessibility’. ECEC availability is not the focus of this report. However where there is a lack of availability this may be a barrier to families accessing care that best meets their needs (Phillips, 1995).

## What does flexible childcare look like?

The Productivity Commission has taken a narrow view of flexibility, citing ‘operating hours that are not sufficiently broad to allow parents to meet work commitments, in particular, ECEC services are not available for those who regularly work outside the traditional 9–5 work day’ (Productivity Commission, p. 364).

However, this Report accepts a broader set of flexible practices which may be implemented by early childhood services including:

- flexible operating hours
- flexible location
- flexible sessions and enrolment patterns
- meeting the broader needs of the family—including integrated service models and ECEC services working together to meet family’s needs.

**Recommendation 2: Policy approaches to improve flexibility for families should address flexibility at work and in the family as well as supporting flexibility in early childhood education and care.**

# Linking flexible practice to the *National Quality Standard*

There are key links to providing flexibility to families and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). This helps to provide context for services in approaching flexible practice. Flexible practices are part of delivering quality early childhood education and care for children and families.

## Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

NQS Quality Area 6, Collaborative partnerships with families and communities, is particularly focused on supporting services to develop respectful supportive relationships with families (Standard 6.1).

Families have a role in 'contributing to service decisions' (Element 6.1.2), and this may include aspects of flexible service delivery. Services may consult families on aspects of their operations in a range of ways including surveys, conversations and meetings. This feedback can be used to improve the business of delivering early childhood education and care and improve flexibility to better meet families' needs.

It is also important to recognise that families, and parents in particular, are often busy, juggling a number of priorities, and that the service will need to consider a range of strategies to build and maintain relationships with them (ACECQA, 2013, p. 142).

'An effective enrolment and orientation process for families' (Element 6.1.1) may include information about parents' work hours, and preferred pick up and drop off times, as well as other enrolment information.

'Supporting families in their parenting role' (Standard 6.2) and linking with other organisations and service providers (Standard 6.3) is also important. Early

childhood services can provide flexibility by supporting families to connect with other community services, including professional support. Early childhood services may act as a point of entry for referral to other services that meet the broader needs of children and their families. Partnerships with schools and other early childhood services can often provide greater flexibility to families and help to meet their needs, by providing co-located or integrated ECEC solutions.



## Relationships with children

Services must 'ensure that 'the dignity and the rights of every child are maintained at all times' (NQS Element 5.2.3). The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* provides the foundation for children's rights.

## Educational program and practice

As children have agency, their views should also be heard, and considered (NQS Element 1.1.6). Services may discuss aspects of flexible service delivery with children about issues that affect them in ways that children can understand. Services should also recognise that families have the key responsibility for children's upbringing.

## Leadership and service management

Operational quality is reflected in NQS Quality Area 7, Leadership and service management. Early childhood services can be leaders in flexible service provision, by meeting the needs of children and families.

The OECD suggests that flexible early childhood provision also stems from 'operational quality, in particular, management that focuses on responsiveness to local need, quality improvement and effective team building' (OECD, 2006, p. 128). The quality of operational standards depends largely on the professional competence of local administration and leaders of centres.

## Flexibility and quality improvement

As the flexibility that early childhood services offer links with the *National Quality Standards*, services can assess their practices against the NQS in their Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement.

Early childhood services may refer to a range of contextual information to assess what families' needs are and put in place quality improvement strategies to address these needs. This contextual information may include surveys or consultation with parents, as well as other local data sets such as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), population and market data.

**Recommendation 3: Early childhood services should reflect how they offer flexibility for families against the *National Quality Standard* and where quality improvements can be made to meet the needs of children and families.**

# Children's interests in practice

As discussed earlier, children's interests must be paramount when considering the implementation of flexible practice.

This was echoed by the Productivity Commission which said that the Government should not '... necessarily support the level of flexibility of services desired by some parents' (in this case because of the potential negative consequences for the child, as well as the cost to taxpayers)' (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 67).

Many services used the survey to advocate for children's interests and rights. The contention between flexible practice and children's interest was also recognised.

*It is important to balance children's home life and care requirements ensuring children's rights are the uppermost concern.*

Long day care service, metropolitan NSW

*If I have a vacancy I can offer it to a parent who needs that day if the care is ongoing so the child still experiences an ongoing secure attachment. I would not do one-off placements due to attachment theory.*

Family day care educator, metropolitan SA

The comments by early childhood professionals did not suggest that flexibility and the interests of children were always incompatible; children's interests may not be an absolute barrier to flexible practices. It is the approach to these interests that matters.



## A children's rights approach

Early childhood services can consider how to support children's rights when implementing flexible practices.

A foundation for this approach is the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). An example of this would include that children have a right to have their say in decisions that affect them (UNCRC, Article 12) and to have their opinions taken into account.

*Supporting young children's rights: Draft Statement of intent (2015–2018)* (National Children's Commissioner & ECA, 2014) provides high-level principles and areas for future collective work, advocacy and action by early childhood services, linking with the *Early Years Learning Framework* and other key practice documents.

The *Statement of Intent*, which is still in draft form, provides a framework in addressing flexible practice from a children's rights perspective.

The right of children 'to be heard' might mean that a professional working with young children:

- recognises children's agency and their individual and evolving capacity to participate in day-to-day considerations relating to their lives

- builds capacity, skills and knowledge of children's rights to implement these in their day-to-day practice
- facilitates learning environments that foster opportunities for all children to express themselves
- listens to and value children's views and opinions and show that their views have been acted on
- advocates for children's views and opinions to be heard and valued within the early learning environment, the family and the community.

**Recommendation 4: Early childhood services should consider how to support children's rights when implementing flexible practice, including giving children a voice in the development of flexible services.**

## Risk framework approach

There are a range of risks associated with operating early childhood education and care services. The risks associated with children's interests hold particular gravity.

A comprehensive and strategic approach to dealing with risk can assist services to effectively meet business objectives. The international standard, ISO 31000:2009, *Risk management—Principles and guidelines*, provides principles, framework and a process for managing risk and can be used by any organisation 'regardless of its size, activity or sector' (ISO, 2009). Using the discipline of ISO 31000 can help early childhood services to identify and mitigate risks and to adopt risk treatment strategies. This framework may be particularly helpful in approaching the flexibility in early childhood services where particular risks need to be managed.

Once services have identified risks associated with a particular flexible model, risk treatment strategies can be adopted to help mitigate these risks, based on the risk appetite established by the organisation. These strategies may then be reflected in policy and procedure and practice.

## Strategies protecting children's interests

Strategies designed to protect children's interests may differ from service to service, and the flexible model being implemented.

For example, strategies that could protect children's interests may include restricting session length, or reducing hours at the corresponding end of the day. Some services have policies to ensure children are not in care for longer than 12 hours in a given day. Services offering extended hours have reported that they closely monitor children's time in care so that it was not excessive.

The stability of ECEC is also important for children's outcomes. To improve stability for children, services can maximise the continuity of staff and group arrangements so that children can form better quality relationships with their educators and peers.

This can be difficult for services offering extended hours in long day care settings. If group numbers are small, children of different ages are often brought together in the same room at the beginning and end of the day, and so maintaining continuity of educators can be a challenge.

There are risks to children of not providing flexible services. For example if families do not have the option of extended hours, in some circumstances families might otherwise resort to using multiple care arrangements which can lead to more difficult transitions in and out of the services, and more challenging behaviours in some cases.

Services can consider whether the environment is suitable for evening or overnight care arrangements. Minimising sleep disruption, and providing a 'home environment' and appropriate programming during evenings, may be important.

**Recommendation 5: Early childhood services implementing flexible models of ECEC should consider using risk management framework, and developing appropriate risk treatment strategies, particularly in relation to the interests of children.**

## Quality and the scope of the *National Quality Framework*

The *National Quality Framework* (NQF) has established a framework for the quality improvement of early childhood services. Meeting the *National Quality Standard* can help services to achieve quality objectives for children, as well as improving flexibility for families.

However, not all service types are regulated under the *Education and Care Services National Law*. In-home care services and occasional care services do not fall into the scope of the NQF, in-home care services are only subject to the *In-home care Guidelines* which do not provide the same level of quality assurance, assessment, and regulation as other service types as under the NQF.

Many in-home care services are already demonstrating that they are meeting the NQS with qualified educators and professional support and monitoring delivered through a central coordination unit.

Expanding the *National Quality Framework* to include in-home care and other out of scope services would improve access to quality early childhood education and care for children participating in these services, and provide a foundation for flexible early childhood services that meets the needs of children and families.

**Recommendation 6: State and territory governments should legislate, through the COAG Education Council, to amend the *Education and Care Services National Law* to include in-home care and other out of scope services within the scope of the *National Quality Framework*.**

# The attributes of flexible services

The attributes of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are important in understanding the conditions that support flexible practice. Replicating these conditions may assist other ECEC services to implement flexible practices.

The stability of client families can assist services to implement flexible practice. If an early childhood service develops an understanding of the client family's needs, these can be met over a period of time, supported through effective communication. The stability, or the consistency of attendance, of client families was a significant attribute of early childhood services implementing flexible practice.

Flexibility in early childhood programming may also assist the implementation of flexible arrangements for families. The purpose of early childhood education is to provide early learning opportunities for children in a

nurturing environment. Flexible practice may challenge the ability of services to deliver developmental activities at certain times, sessions and group settings by consistent educators and teachers who must also be able to observe and guide the child's development. Providing flexible early childhood programming was identified by services as being conducive to flexible practice.

Management and committees/boards manage the affairs of early childhood providers, strongly influencing the nature of services delivered to families, which may include a commitment to, or support of, flexible practice. Strong management or committee support for flexible practices was considered to be an attribute of a significant number of services implementing flexible practices.

**Table 5. Attributes enabling the implementation of flexible practices**

Services currently delivering flexible ECEC were asked what attributes of their service enable the implementation of flexible practice. They were asked to select from a list of possible options.

	<b>LDC</b>	<b>FDC educator</b>	<b>FDC service</b>	<b>OSHC</b>	<b>IHC</b>	<b>Preschool</b>	<b>Other services</b>
<b>IT innovation</b>	3.8%	5.9%	18.0%	1.0%	26.3%	3.5%	2.8%
<b>Accounting expertise</b>	5.0%	5.9%	10.0%	1.0%	26.3%	6.5%	8.3%
<b>Security of tenure in the premises</b>	7.9%	11.8%	6.0%	6.2%	15.8%	18.5%	22.2%
<b>Stability of client families using the service</b>	30.0%	52.9%	42.0%	20.6%	57.9%	32.0%	50.0%
<b>Flexibility in early childhood programming</b>	26.8%	51.8%	46.0%	10.3%	63.2%	34.0%	44.4%
<b>Strong industrial relations advice and support</b>	4.1%	5.9%	6.0%	3.1%	26.3%	4.5%	2.8%
<b>Strong management/committee support</b>	23.9%	41.2%	76.0%	22.7%	94.7%	31.5%	44.4%

Table 5 continued on next page



Table 5 continued

<b>Strong parental and community engagement</b>	21.6%	38.8%	42.0%	22.7%	52.6%	36.5%	52.8%
<b>Strong partnerships with other organisations/ government/corporations</b>	7.9%	22.4%	38.0%	12.4%	63.2%	11.0%	25.0%
<b>Low overheads</b>	5.8%	18.8%	10.0%	4.1%	15.8%	6.0%	11.1%
<b>A professional workforce</b>	23.3%	23.5%	42.0%	14.4%	68.4%	32.5%	36.1%
<b>Workforce stability</b>	19.5%	14.1%	28.0%	13.4%	36.8%	26.0%	36.1%
<b>A flexible workforce</b>	19.0%	30.6%	48.0%	18.6%	73.7%	22.5%	25.0%
<b>A commitment to flexible practice in the service's strategic/business plan</b>	14.6%	31.8%	42.0%	11.3%	47.4%	16.5%	41.7%
<b>Other</b>	2.3%	7.1%	6.0%	1.0%	0.0%	6.0%	2.8%

## Inherent flexibility of service types

Some early childhood service types are inherently flexible, as their flexible attributes are derived from the service model.

For example, in-home care and family day care services have advantages over centre-based care in offering a small group size and a home environment for families. This may be particularly beneficial for families requiring extended hours services.

Outside school hours care (OSHC) can also be considered inherently flexible as most OSHC services are co-located with schools or offer transport services, and deliver care before school, after school and during school holidays.

This is not to say that all service types cannot improve flexibility. A key principle of the NQS is continuous improvement, building on strengths and responding to the needs of families.

While some service types may not be 'inherently flexible' this does not mean that innovative approaches can't be taken to improve flexibility of that service type. For example, while long day care may not be able to offer flexible hours to the same extent as

family day care or in-home care, there may be flexible approaches for long day care which meet the needs of families. Even small changes to improve flexibility can assist families greatly.

## Technology and flexible practice



Technology use may enhance the ability of early childhood services to improve outcomes for children, families and the business.

While IT innovation was also not considered to be an important attribute of early childhood services implementing flexible practice from ECA's flexibility

survey, some early childhood services have taken innovative steps in using technology to improve business practices to find savings in money, time and paperwork. Digital technology can give early childhood services the tools to overcome barriers and implement flexible practices that were otherwise too difficult.

### **Case Study: Woodland Education, Vic.**

In a purpose-built, newly-opened centre on St Kilda Road, flexibility in long day care takes on new meaning.

This early education and care service, enrolling children from six weeks to school age, is a family business run by Faye Woodland, an educator with more than 40 years' experience, and her son, Mark Woodland.

While still in the early stages of operation, the service has been designed with long-term flexibility in mind—the capacity to open six days a week or for one-off special events and extended hours care (up to 10.00 pm) are just a few. The service has not yet seen families' utilise the 10.00 pm pick up time, however some families flexible pick up times can be 7.00 pm.

Mark Woodland uses technology, including a purpose-built app and Google glass™, to provide flexibility and to speed up processes for educators and parents in several ways. The service is paperless, everything from enrolments, visitor and parent sign-in, daily communication with families and formal documentation are seamlessly supported by interactive technology. Parents have swipe card access for security and to record entry. An online log-in for state regulatory authorities allows them to review documentation off-site to prepare for visits. Nursery monitoring of temperature, heart rate and sleep-time provides reassurance for parents of young babies.

An app developed for the centre provides updates, images and messaging between the director and families. The daily diary, events and updates are exchanged via the app as well as one-off information and arrangements such as a traffic delay, parent authorisations, changed pick up times and staffing rosters.

Prospective parents can visit or take a virtual tour of the centre in real time, with Mark wearing Google glasses and relaying the images as he describes details and answers their queries—particularly helpful for out of town or overseas parents. Child health and development professionals can observe, review and discuss a particular child with educators prior to making appointments or recommending further action.

The preschool educator, Faye, credits integrated technology with strengthening bonds between families and educators. When they come together at the end of the day, parents already have detailed information about daily activities, sleep time, food and nappy changes. The discussion can build on these to explore the child's learning in more detail or to strengthen rapport between educators and parents.

Early Childhood Australia's *Digital Business Kit*—*Getting up to speed*, is designed to equip managers, educators, leaders and other staff, as well as families, to understand the possibilities and impacts that digital technology brings. The kit includes tip sheets, profiles, online guides, videos and web links available at [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/digital-business-kit](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/digital-business-kit).

As part of the Digital Business Kit project, ECA surveyed and visited services, schools, educators and carers, teachers and academics. The project's progress shows that technology implementation is not well developed across the early childhood sector when compared with other sectors, and a lack of skills and planning are significant barriers.

Technology plans can help early childhood services to plan and put in place strategies to choose technology that supports educational outcomes for children and the business side of early education. Technology plans help services to think and track what is needed to achieve a particular outcome, such as improving flexibility for families e.g. by implementing a new rostering or enrolment system, or simply engaging parents about flexibility using online surveys.

Only 28 per cent of services had implemented a technology plan according to a survey conducted of the early childhood sector. This suggests that services are not being intentional or strategic about technology use.

### **Excerpt from Early Childhood Australia's Digital Business Kit**

ECA's Digital Business Kit suggests services should:

- Tap into your existing community: ask others who are already doing good work online to learn how they got started, what works, what doesn't.
- Ask basic questions: 'Pool your ignorance'—identify what you don't know and what you need to know.
- Invite experienced individuals from your network to talk or share a case study with your team or your professional body.
- Swap your expertise with others. Use professional development opportunities, planning sessions, staff meetings or training days to discuss and learn more.

Not for profits may be able to tap into pro bono services—online consultants and digital strategists as well as volunteers or interns with digital expertise—who may want to contribute to the community.

**Recommendation 7: Early childhood services be encouraged to develop digital technology plans to improve children's outcomes and business outcomes such as flexibility for families.**

# Flexible operating hours

Flexible operating hours may assist services to meet families' needs, particularly by aligning with families' work hours, or other commitments.

Flexible operating hours may refer to hours that vary to meet family needs, such as changing closing times based on parent's preferences. Most commonly, flexible operating hours refers to extended hours. This may include offering later sessions, opening earlier or later to allow parents to commute long distances, or offering emergency care for children at risk. It may also include '24 hour care' or weekend care.

The Productivity Commission analysed the opening times of early childhood services in its Draft Report from the Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning utilising data from the Commonwealth Government's child care management system. It found that Early Childhood Australia's data, presented below, on operating hours for long day care, 'are similar to the administrative data' (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 366).

## Opening hours

Long day care services open earlier than most other service types. A significant majority (68.2 per cent) of long day care services opened from 6.30 am to 7.30 am. The largest group, or 25.2 per cent of long day care services surveyed, opened at 6.30 am. This is notable as it is well before common working hours or the 'nine to five' work day, though many shift workers start their rostered shifts before this time.

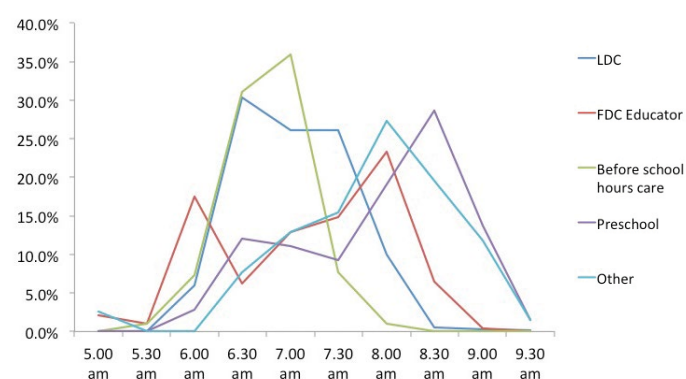
While some family day care educators (17.5 per cent) opened early at 6.00 am, family day care educators were also spread across later opening hours, with most opening before 8.30 am. A small but significant number of educators (8.1 per cent) began services from 12.00 am, the highest of any other care type. These results suggest a highly individualised approach to service delivery, with a variety of different families' needs being taken into account by different family day care educators.

Outside school hours care services operating before school were more likely to open earlier than any other service type, though there is a correlation with long day care opening times. A majority of before school hours care services opened between 6.30 am and 7.00 am accounting for 67 percent of services.

The largest group of 'other services' surveyed opened at 8.00 am (27.3 per cent).

**Table 6. Opening times of early childhood services**

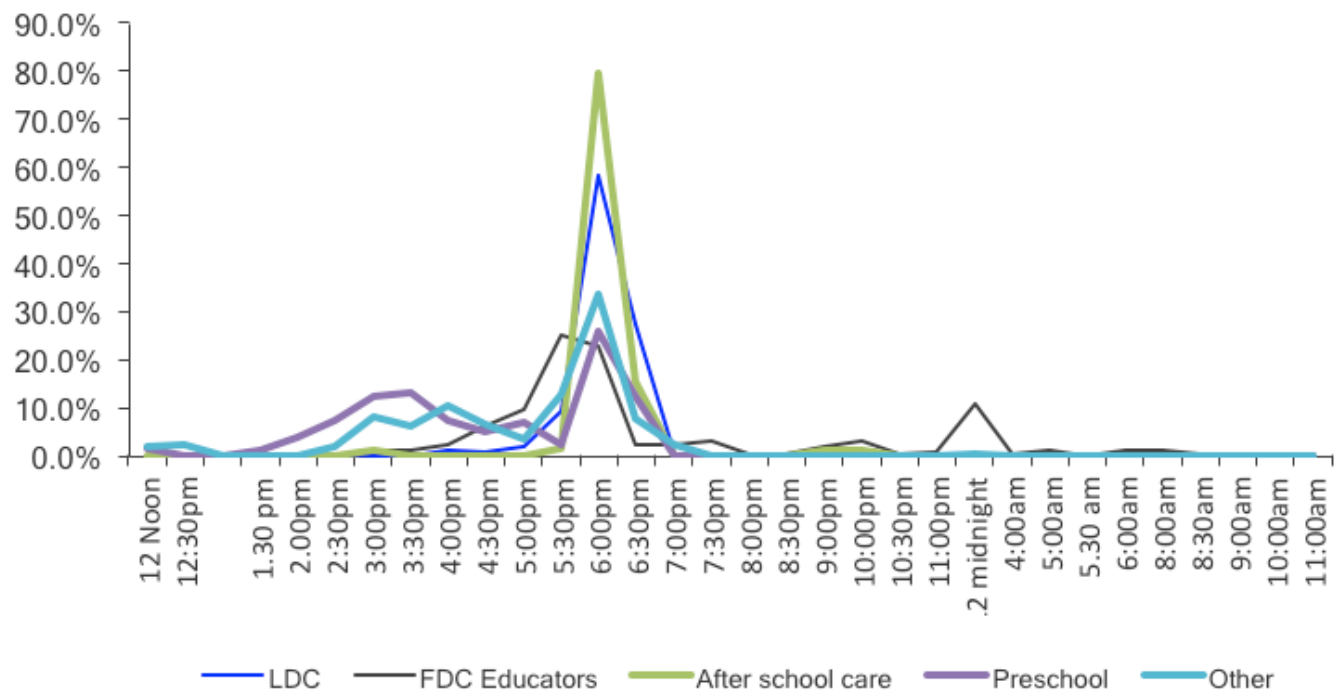
Services were asked what their opening and closing times were to the nearest half-hour. Some services open or close on the quarter hour or three quarters of an hour so the results will show some statistical error by up to half an hour.



**Table 7. Opening times of early childhood services**

	12.00 am	12.30 am	5.00 am	5.30 am	6.00 am	6.30 am	7.00 am	7.30 am	8.00 am	8.30 am
<b>LDC</b>	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	6.03%	30.3%	26.1%	26.1%	10.0%	0.5%
<b>FDC Educator</b>	8.1%	1.0%	2.1%	1.0%	17.5%	6.3%	12.9%	14.8%	23.3%	6.5%
<b>Before School Hours Care</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	7.3%	31.0%	36.0%	7.7%	1.0%	0.0%
<b>Preschool</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%	12.0%	11.1%	9.2%	19.0%	28.7%
<b>Other</b>	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	12.9%	15.5%	27.3%	19.6%
	9.00 am	9.30 am	10.00 am	11.00 am	12 noon	3.30 pm	5.00 pm	6.30 pm	9.00 pm	9.30 pm
<b>LDC</b>	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.1%
<b>FDC Educator</b>	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Before School Hours Care</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Preschool</b>	13.8%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%
<b>Other</b>	11.9%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

**Table 8. Closing times of early childhood services**



**Table 9. Closing times of early childhood services**

	12.00 pm	12.30 pm	1.00 pm	1.30 pm	2.00 pm	2.30 pm	3.00 pm	3.30 pm	4.00 pm	4.30 pm	5.00 pm
<b>LDC</b>	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	1.1%	0.8%	1.9%
<b>FDC Educators</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	2.4%	6.0%	9.4%
<b>After School Care</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Preschool</b>	1.6%	0.1%	0.1%	1.0%	3.9%	7.3%	12.3%	<b>13.1%</b>	7.3%	4.8%	6.8%
<b>Other</b>	2.1%	2.65	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%	8.3%	6.2%	10.4%	6.7%	3.6%
	5.30 pm	6.00 pm	6.30 pm	7.00 pm	7.30 pm	8.00 pm	8.30 pm	9.00 pm	10.00 pm	10.30 pm	11.00 pm
<b>LDC</b>	9.3%	<b>58.3%</b>	27.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%
<b>FDC Educators</b>	<b>25.1%</b>	22.9%	2.4%	2.1%	3.2%	0.4%	0.4%	1.9%	3.2%	0.2%	0.6%
<b>After School Care</b>	1.4%	<b>79.4%</b>	15.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Preschool</b>	2.3%	<b>25.8%</b>	12.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
<b>Other</b>	13.0%	<b>33.7%</b>	7.8%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	12.00 am	4.00 am	5.00 am	5.30 am	6.00 am	8.00 am	8.30 am				
<b>LDC</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%				
<b>FDC Educators</b>	10.9%	0.2%	1.1%	0.0%	1.1%	1.3%	0.2%				
<b>After School Care</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%				
<b>Preschool</b>	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%				
<b>Other</b>	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%				

## Closing times

Closing times among long day care services were more homogenous than opening times across different service types.

A significant majority (72.0 per cent) of long day care services surveyed closed between 6.00 pm and 6.30 pm. The largest group of long day care services surveyed, (49 per cent), closed at 6.00 pm,

just beyond traditional working hours. Closing times beyond 6.30 pm were only offered by 0.8 per cent of services surveyed. No services surveyed closed later than 11.00 pm.

Similarly, a large majority (79.4 per cent) of after school hours care services closed at around 6.00 pm with some closing at around 6.30 pm. Only a further 2 per cent of services opened beyond 6.30 pm.

Family day care educators surveyed closed slightly earlier than other care types. The largest group of family day care educators (25.1 per cent) closed at 5.30 pm.

This suggests that some services are less flexible in the evening than they are in the morning, potentially making it difficult for some families with later finishing times and/or a long commute from work.

It is surprising that so few long day services surveyed made use of the capacity to provide multiple sessions to offer extended hours. Feedback suggests that this is primarily because of lack of demand, variable

demand, concern for the interests of children or the availability and cost of staff to cover these shifts.

In-home care services were more likely to have educators offering flexible operating times. When asked about the closing time of their most flexible early childhood educator, almost half of in-home care services surveyed had educators closing at midnight, followed by 12.30 am. This result may reflect the hours of an educator offering 24 hour care, rather than an exact closing time. It is unclear to what extent most educators attached to in-home care services offer, in terms of opening times.

### **Case Study: Lady Gowrie, Tas.**

Lady Gowrie Tasmania operates several long day care services and a family day care scheme around Tasmania.

CEO, Ros Cornish says that Lady Gowrie's centres traditionally operated an 8.00 am to 6.00 pm model but the organisation recently decided to extend the hours to provide extra flexibility for families.

'We started extending the hours there to allow people to get to the city for work and study', Ros says.

While the extension is only half an hour at the beginning and end of the day, this could mean a big difference in flexibility for families.

'We had some feedback from families that they were rushing to get back, they couldn't make that timeline. If you're working in retail and you're working until 6.00 there's no way you can pick up at 6.00', Ros says.

So far, take up of the extra 30 minutes has been slow, despite parents being made aware it was available.

'I don't know if it's a cultural thing, i.e. "they're only open until 6.00", despite our marketing and promo or the location of those centres, the need is not there to the extent envisaged', says Ros. This may change over time as families become aware of the flexibility options.

Staff took time to adjust to the change. If there were no children at the service, then some educators are allowed to leave, but due to CCB requirements, the centre manager remains until 6.30 pm.

Lady Gowrie has a centralised waitlist incorporating both long day care and family day care. Families requiring extended hours before 7.30 am or beyond 6.30 pm are referred through to Lady Gowrie's family day care services.

Lady Gowrie's family day care service is relatively small in numbers but the organisation made a business decision to keep numbers low to enable extra pedagogical support for educators with a strong focus on quality improvement. This strategy was considered imperative as the educators work predominantly in isolation.

'It certainly means it costs us more to deliver that, but our mandate is quality and making sure children come first', Ros says.

*Case study continued on next page*

Case study continued

Some of the educators also work extended hours and one educator currently provides 24/7 care. The flexible hours are utilised by shift workers, in the health and retail industry. Educators must let the managers know that they're planning to do a period of 24/7 care and then a manager is placed on call during that period of time in case of emergencies.

### Tips

- Undertake a survey or analysis of needs prior to embarking on a change to hours of operation.
- Advertise changes in hours of operation to families to support access.
- Even short extensions to opening hours may provide flexibility to families without a significant extra cost.
- Trialing extensions to hours may help to understand whether there is demand for these services.
- If your service cannot provide extended hours care, think about referring families to other services offering extended hours care.
- Think about how to support family day care educators providing 24/7 care, especially emergency on-call support.

## Twenty-four hour care

For services, 24 hour care is considered to be a period of continuous 24 hour care of a child where the child does not return to the care and supervision of the parent or guardian (Dept. Ed., 2014, p. 84).

### Excerpt from A New Tax System (Family Assistance) Act 1999, Section 3

- (5) If, in relation to a **24 hour** care period and a child:
- (a) an approved child care service provides care to the child during the whole of the period; or
  - (b) an approved child care service:
    - (i) provides care to the child during more than half of the period; and
    - (ii) during the remaining part of the period, when the service is not providing care to the child, has responsibility for the child;

the service providing the care, or providing the care and having the responsibility, is providing **24 hour care** to the child.

Twenty-four hour care is granted only if 'both the individual and that individual's partner (if any) are unable to care for the child and have work related commitments during those periods' or 'exceptional circumstances exist'. Services can only offer up to 14 periods of 24 hour care each year without seeking approval from the Secretary (Family assistance ACT, 1999, section 56).

The definition in the Act that '24 hour care' is a 24 hour period of continuous care may be distinguished from services offering to provide care during any 24 hour period. Many services surveyed suggested that they 'offer' or were 'available' to take children '24/7'.

*[[I] have been 'available' when parents who work as Police have had to work back later. Also have been 'available' if they have needed to start earlier, although this does not mean the extra service was needed, simply 'available' to those particular parents.*

Family day care educator, metropolitan Vic.

In most cases 24 hour care actually meant that the educator or service could take children overnight or on weekends or were otherwise flexible in negotiating hours of care.



*I have a couple of educators who operate extended hours, one family being a single parent family who works in the hospitality industry. Educator works 2.30 pm to 11.30 pm.*

In-home care service, metropolitan Qld

Other services did provide 24 hour care within the definition, often catering for families in emergency situations or at-risk children receiving Special Child Care Benefit covering the full cost of care.

None suggested that they used more than 14 periods of 24 hour care in one year.

Some early childhood service had policies to cap the number of hours children are in care, to protect the best interests of the child, to maintain the educator's work/life balance or to ensure that families are not breaching the cap on subsidised hours.

Some family day care services reported a lack of support from coordination units including specific requirements regarding extended hours care.

### **Case Study: Nature Alliance Family Day Care, WA.**

Nature Alliance Family Day operates from Perth and Busselton, with educators providing ECEC throughout WA.

Family Day Care Educator, Lorraine, provides care for four children under school age in Ellenbrook in Perth's South Eastern outskirts.

Many of the families using the educator service are shift workers and single parents. Lorraine works with families around their care needs, including police, nurses and hospitality and 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) workers.

'I do have quite a few shift workers that are in the position that they don't have anyone to provide care', Lorraine says.

Lorraine not only provides care for children during the day, but also provides an overnight session for another cohort of children.

'At the moment [the day care] children go home anywhere between 3.30 and 5.45 pm. And the evening care children come in basically whenever the parents need for shift work, as long as I'm not over my numbers I can cater for them', she says.

Rather than charging more for families using overnight care, Lorraine actually charges less.

'They're asleep, they're not using resources. Generally the person needing care is in a much more desperate situation so there's no point in going to work and earning \$20 and paying me \$28', Lorraine says.

The evening care environment provided for the children is the same that Lorraine provides for her own children.

When the children are placed in care with her until late at night they are picked up by their parents the next day 6.30 am, rather than waking them up.

Lorraine has found the work/life balance difficult to manage but she works with her daughter (also an educator) to manage both cohorts of children coming through.

'[One parent] does his shift and then comes straight here and then I've got the kids ready for school. He usually does the lunches but if he hasn't then I make them. So I don't see it just as day care because in child care you become part of the family.'

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

One of the children attends kindergarten two or three times a week so Lorraine provides care on the 'off' days. Lorraine also picks two children from school in the afternoons.

The family day care coordination unit at Nature Alliance provides support, especially during any emergencies. Lorraine sees their role as critical to the ability to provide flexible care.



## Weekend care

Families with parents working in the retail and other industries sometimes need weekend care. Penalty rates apply under the Children's Services Award for employees working on Saturdays and Sundays which can increase wage costs often making it difficult to work during these times.

When surveyed, up to a third of family day care educators suggested that they opened on Saturday (32.3 per cent) and two fifths on Sundays (40 per cent), far greater than other service types. This may suggest that educators offer care during these times on an ad hoc basis rather than delivering it regularly. It may also show that home-based care environments are preferred by parents on weekends, or that family day care educators find it viable to operate on these days.

## Variable hours

Services may change operating hours from time to time based on local factors or family preferences. The survey data shows a slight variability between days in terms of opening hours and some services even closed during the week. It is unclear what particular factors may be affecting these decisions.

A small number of services support extended hours at particular times of the year such as public holidays, or to accommodate seasonal activities. Of long day care services surveyed, only 5.1 per cent occasionally

offered extended hours throughout the year. This contrasted with 12.6 per cent of OSHC services and 73.1 per cent of family day care educators. The most common arrangement was 'vacation care' during holiday periods or public holidays.

*As part of [our] local government a vacation service is offered during brief closure during Christmas/New Year break.*

Director, long day care service, metropolitan NSW

*If I have had a parent who needed to work on a public holiday I have provided care.*

Family day care educator, metropolitan SA

*It is usually relating to work hours of parents and if they are unable to arrive prior to 5.30 pm or need to drop their children off early. This also could be due to extended training and meetings for parents.*

Family day care educator, metropolitan Qld

Some long day care services affiliated with universities also offer extended hours, including weekend care in certain periods to cover exam times.

For in-home care and family day care services, providing emergency care was common such as during fire season or care for families on Special Child Care Benefit and 24 hour care for short term crises.

## Family Assistance Law

Services also report that it was unusual for families to hit the maximum limit of 50 hours of subsidised care per week.

Long day care services must open for at least eight continuous hours on each normal working day on which they operate (Dept.Ed., 2014, p. 24).

While the maximum length of long day care sessions is 12 hours, services can be approved to operate for more than 12 hours by offering multiple sessions (Dept.Ed., 2014, p. 73). This enables providers a level of flexibility to open earlier and close later.

Long day care services can also be approved to offer up to 14 periods of 24 hour care each year. For services, 24 hour care is considered to be a period of continuous 24 hour care of a child where the child does not return to the care and supervision of the parent or guardian (Dept.Ed., 2014, p. 84). The Productivity Commission concluded that the operational criteria for Child Care Benefit (CCB), on minimum operational criteria, unreasonably constrain

services' ability to operate (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 367). However, other factors are likely to have an impact on opening hours. The Children's Services Award, family preferences and demand and other regulations on opening hours are likely to have had a far greater influence on opening hours than Family Assistance Law.

## Barriers to implementing flexible operating hours

Costs are a significant challenge in offering extended hours due to penalty rates which are applied outside of ordinary hours.

Parents may also preference 'home environments', either in informal care arrangements, family day care or in-home care after ordinary hours. This may mean that demand for extended hours can be a challenge. If there are only a small number of families using the service, or variable demand, extended hours can often be difficult to sustain in the long term.

### Case Study: City Community Children's Centre, South Australia

*For many parents, the provision of child care services is crucial to enable them to work, study, have leisure time, job security, and compete in their work career structure. We encourage use of the Centre's services for a variety of purposes, and to see it as a place that provides high quality, safe child care during all hours.*

#### City Community Children's Centre Philosophy statement

City Community Children's Centre is a community based long day care centre in the city of Adelaide. The centre is open six days a week and is licensed for 62 places during the day and 40 during the evening.

The centre's director, Debbie Carmen, says the centre is the only community-based long day care centre offering non-standard hours care in Adelaide. She says the extended hours service emerged in the 1980s with many women moving to low paying jobs involving shift work and a lack of flexible care during the evenings.

Currently, shift workers such as nurses are the most common families using the extended hours, particularly where both parents are rostered on at the same time. Debbie says that accommodating constant changes in enrolment of shift workers can be challenge if the centre is fully enrolled. However, the evening session is also used on an ad hoc basis by parents where other informal care arrangements are not available.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

The number of parents using the after-hours service varies and currently the extended hours service is not at capacity. Parents often find out about the service by word of mouth in the workplace from other parents. Though Debbie says that many families do not know that the extended hours service is available.

When utilised, the City Community Children's Centre is open on for extended hours on Wednesdays and Thursdays until the last child is picked up, commonly around 11.30 pm or 12.00 am. The service is open overnight on Friday.

### **Opening hours**

Monday to Tuesday	6.30 am to 6.00 pm
Wednesday to Thursday	6.30 am to 11.00 pm
Friday	6.30 am to 12.00 am (Sat.)
Saturday	12.00 am to 7.30 am (Sun.)

The sessions that families commonly book are 2.00 pm to 10.30 pm or 12.00 pm to 9.30 pm. There is a differential fee for parents using the extended hours of up to \$1.50 per hour, though casual sessions are also available.

The service closely monitors the ongoing cost of delivering evening care, but does not budget for the extended hours separately to the day sessions. Despite running at loss during the evenings, Debbie says that the service is committed to extended hours as part of the centre's philosophy and that extended hours are part of the whole service the centre offers to the community.

'You don't fill like you do with day care and you don't necessarily have the consistency of the same families or the same number of families all the time, but you've still got to have your minimum of two staff on', Debbie says.

The Centre does find staffing evening and overnight care challenging as many staff are not prepared to work outside of normal hours. However, other staff recognise the benefits of working extended hours and the service is flexible around starting times, particularly for part-time staff who are studying or on parental leave during the day.

City Community Children's Centre provides experiences for children that are appropriate for the time of the day, and according to the interests of children. This might include quiet games, reading, and involving the children in cooking supper, before going to bed. The Centre often includes these experiences in its observations of children's learning.

Educators are guided by what parents request in terms of bedtime. Often children have different nap times and, due to the small numbers of children during the evening, there is flexibility to accommodate this in the space available.

*Case study continued on next page*

Case study continued

### Tips

- Encourage educators to be flexible in terms of the way that they think about the services provided to families.
- Think about how flexible services fit into the whole service offering, including the philosophy of the service.
- Ask whether extended hours are worth delivering if they are running at a loss. Look at the organisation as a whole, but understand the costs of delivering extended hours care and monitor these closely.
- Advertise appropriately to improve utilisation of the extended hours.
- Think about appropriate programming for children in an extended hours care, and how this should differ from children's experiences during normal hours.



## Service viability and operating hours

The Government has been asked to re-evaluate requirements on minimum operating hours. This should take into account the benefits and risks of current approval requirements.

**Excerpt from the Productivity Commission, Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning: Draft Report (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 367)**

### Draft recommendation 8.3

The Australian Government should abolish operational requirements that specify minimum or maximum operating weeks or hours for services approved to receive child-based subsidies.

It is unclear what impact the removal of minimum requirements might have. The Government should not assume that early childhood providers will align hours with the needs of families if regulation is removed. Minimum operating hours ensure that services are provided during ordinary work hours, unless there is a good reason to close. As outlined, flexible sessions may enable services to better utilise these opening times using the flexibility offered under the legislation. There may be a benefit on prescribing minimum operating hours to ensure that early childhood services are meeting the needs of most families, particularly those requiring long hours.

Notwithstanding the need to ensure that services are operating during work hours, regional and remote services may have particular difficulty in remaining open for prescribed hours, or days. To address the concerns from regional and remote providers, greater flexibility could be provided to these services based on localised evidence. This would, for example, enable a service to open for three days per week which may accord with local need.

## Children's interests and extended hours

As noted in the chapter on children's interests, excessive hours in early childhood settings may have negative effects on children's socioemotional outcomes, though quality may act as a protective factor.

Issues of particular concern are:

- sleep disruption
- stress

- inadequate opportunities for attachment with the family and other primary care givers
- inappropriate evening care environment.

Early childhood services expressed concern about the negative effect of children in extended hours care arrangements, particularly in long day care settings. One long day care service provider had discontinued offering a late pick up because they did not believe the arrangements were in children's best interests. They commented that their main concern was that certain families would pick children up at 11.00 pm before returning them to the centre at 6.00 am the following day which meant the child was effectively in the constant care of the centre.

### Case Study: Choices Family Day Care, Qld

Choices Family Day Care is a small ECEC provider with approximately 70 educators serving the community of the greater Ipswich, Springfield and Brisbane areas. It caters for approximately 500 children each week.

Service director, Annette Steley says that 'the service caters for a large cross-section of the community. Families in our area include many with diverse needs'. Annette says that through offering flexible family day care, 'we are able to meet the long hours of care and the flexible needs of these families'. Family Day care is the only care option for parents requiring care outside of the conventional hours of 6.00 am to 6.00 pm offered by centres.

'Many Families in our area need flexible care. Many travel long distances commuting into Brisbane for work. A lot of families live in outlying areas such as Jimboomba or Fernvale etcetera, and travel into the city, which is an hour and a half to two hours each way', Annette says. 'We also have many shift workers who need flexible hours of care.'

Families requiring care may be working at local hospitals, gaols and the local meat works. Shifts can include overnight, early or late shifts. Care outside of normal hours is often required. An early start at the meat works could mean a drop off for the children at 4.00 am, Annette says, and early childhood educators work with parents to meet their care needs around their rosters.

'At present we have a majority of working parents, many of which are working rosters. Some of them also work Saturday mornings', Annette says.

Families may access the service for the first time through contacting the coordination unit or family day care educators directly. Many of the individual educator's details are listed on the website [www.careforkids.com.au](http://www.careforkids.com.au).

'Care for Kids is very popular with parents. Parents can access the site to view all the educators in the area, see who's got vacancies, then they are able to contact the educator direct. The educator asks the family to ring Choices to arrange a time for an enrolment interview.'

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

Coordinators assist in placing a child in care, and will then monitor and support the ongoing care of the child with the chosen educator.

'Our service is a not for profit company committed to the protection, safety and wellbeing of children from all cultures and family backgrounds. We strive to meet the flexible hours of care needed by all families. Children are nurtured and cared for in a natural learning environment, learning through play and exploration. Our service has a huge demand for "flexible care" from parents in this area. Some educators work closely with community organisations such as disability services, through providing care for families with children with special needs. Disability services and families really appreciate the assistance offered in the form of the overnight care.'

Family day care educators offer emergency care to children with special needs/circumstances. Annette says that about half a dozen educators have put their hand up to offer this special care in emergency situations. We look closely at the care that's needed, and match this with educators that have vacancies. 'It's usually certain ladies that have had experience in the special needs area that

are available to provide this valuable service to our community', Annette says.

The service keeps track of individual workloads of educators and closely monitors their work/life balance. This usually isn't an issue, because each educator has an individual plan which helps to guide their direction and includes professional development and training.

The service has a fee charging policy which allows educators to set their own fees within a recommended service fee range.



## Planning regulations

Local planning regulations may restrict the opening hours of early childhood education and care services. This may act as a barrier for services offering more flexible hours including extended hours.

### **Lane Cove Development and Control Plan 2010**

#### I.12 Hours of Operation

The maximum hours of operation shall be between 7.00 am and 6.00 pm, Monday til Friday, in a residential zone.

The intention of size controls may be to limit the impact of early childhood education and care centres on the urban environment, particularly in residential areas. This may include concerns about noise emissions and the amenity of the area including traffic.

However, these controls are inherently inflexible for services wanting to extend hours to make their service available to more families, including families working outside of traditional hours.

*[The] Local Council placed opening hours restrictions on our service because we are in a residential area so we are not even able to open the usual hours for a long day care service let alone be flexible with night or weekend care.*

Director, long day care service, metropolitan Vic.

Such controls are common across local and state jurisdictions. While there has been reform to the way in which development and control plans are applied in NSW, these documents still have the principle purpose of:

- a. giving effect to the aims of any environmental planning instrument that applies to the development
- b. facilitating development that is permissible under any such instrument
- c. achieving the objectives of land zones under any such instrument.

The limits, as they are applied by local governments, are placing another layer of effective regulation on early childhood education and care services in addition to Family Assistance Law and the Education and Care Services National Law, as well as general environmental regulations on noise and traffic.

## Restrictions on family day care operating hours

Usually, restrictions on opening hours are only applied to centre based services, however some local governments also place restrictions on family day care provided in educator's homes.

As family day care is often the best alternative for families working outside of traditional hours, restrictions on opening hours may severely impact the workforce participation of these groups.

Family day care services are already subject to ratio requirements under the Education and Care Services National Law which ensure that family day care educators cannot care for more than seven children with a maximum of four under school age. This places a regulatory limit on group size and also limits the impact on the urban environment.

## Improving the flexibility of early childhood developments

The Commonwealth funded the University of Technology Sydney to develop the *Best Practice Guidelines for the Planning and Development of Child Care Facilities* (ACELG, 2014) which has provided a more flexible framework for planning issues concerning early childhood education and care services, including operating hours.

The guidelines provide a strong foundation for local governments to implement more flexible frameworks to support families.

**Recommendation 8: Local governments should remove restrictions on the opening hours of early childhood education and care services and adopt the *Best Practice Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities*.**



# Flexible sessions and enrolment

## Sessions

A session of care is defined under the *Child Care Benefit (Session of Care) Determination 2000* as 'the minimum period of time in respect of which an approved child care service charges a fee for providing child care in any particular case'.

Sessions may be provided at different times of the day for differing periods, including early, late, short, long and multiple sessions.

However, long day care and family day care services must be available to provide care for at least eight hours on a normal working day.

Services showed significant levels of flexibility in relation to most types of sessions. Long sessions in particular were offered by the most significant number of services. With the exception of long day care, alternatives to full day sessions were offered by a large majority of services surveyed such as short, late and multiple sessions.

**Table 10. Sessions of care**

Services were asked whether they currently deliver, or have previously delivered, flexible sessions of care.

	LDC	FDC Service	FDC Educator	IHC	Preschool	Other
<b>Late sessions</b>	22.1%	88.7%	63.1%	100.0%	85.5%	78.6%
<b>Early sessions</b>	23.3%	94.4%	77.4%	91.7%	89.6%	81.3%
<b>Short sessions</b>	20.0%	87.0%	73.5%	83.3%	75.0%	90.0%
<b>Long sessions</b>	51.5%	100.0%	94.2%	100.0%	97.1%	100.0%
<b>Multiple sessions</b>	15.6%	90.3%	83.0%	83.3%	91.5%	93.3%
<b>Can change sessions</b>	19.7%	97.6%	88.3%	91.7%	88.9%	93.8%
<b>Other</b>	4.9%	85.7%	86.4%	16.7%	100.0%	100.0%

Consistent with Family Assistance Law minimum operating requirements, most long day care services reported offering long sessions. However, long day care services did not provide flexible sessions to the same extent as other service types. Though some services offered other types of sessions such as multiple sessions.

*We currently offer 8.00 am–1.00 pm, or 1.00 pm–6.00 pm sessions. We also offer 8.00 am–6.00 pm and until recently we offered hourly bookings. We*

*now only offer hourly bookings around preschool times and during orientation.*

Director, long day care service, regional SA

Some services reported that families had the flexibility of using less hours, even if full day sessions were provided.

*We open from 8.00 am–6.00 pm. Families can come and go at any time in this period.*

Nominated Supervisor, long day care service, regional SA

There was a high degree of flexibility in the sessions offered through family day care. The responses correlate with highly individualised care arrangements 'arranged on an individual basis between families and educators'.

*[Our]extremely diverse ... services include 4.00 am starts, before school care, changing rosters, overnight care, weekend care, short term or long term dynamic care requirements ...*

Family day care service, regional NSW

*Care is arranged in line with family needs. These could include overnight care for parents who work night shifts. Early starts or evening pickups are all part of family day care.*

Family day care service, metropolitan Qld

## Family Assistance Law and sessions

Under Family Assistance Law, (*Child Care Benefit [Session of Care] Determination 2000 [Cth]*) a session of care may start on one day and end on the next day (Cl. 4[2]). While a session of care must not exceed 12 hours (Cl. 4[3]), if approved to operate more than 12 hours, a long day care service must put in place multiple sessions with neither exceeding 12 hours.

Long day care services are currently required to be open for at least eight continuous hours on each normal working day on which they operate (Dept. Ed., 2014, p. 24). Where a child attends a session of care, services cannot prevent the child from attending any part of that session (Dept. Ed., 2014, p. 25).

Different provisions apply to outside school hours care. A standard period of before school hours care means the period of two hours ending immediately before school starts (Cl. 7[1]), through this is a minimum (Cl. 7[2]). A standard session must not exceed two hours (Cl. 7[3]). Clause 7(4) provides for additional 30 minute sessions before or after the care period.

For after school care the standard period and session is longer, at three and a half hours starting immediately after school finishes (Cl. 8[1]). Clause 8(4) provides for additional 30 minute sessions before or after the care period.

**Recommendation 9: Support more services to offer flexible sessions under existing Family Assistance Law arrangements.**

## Changes to enrolment

Flexibility in enrolment links closely with flexibility in sessions, and is another key area of flexibility for families.

Flexibility in enrolment may refer to a variety of practices including swapping days, changing the number of days in care, changing days or hours at short notice, booking additional sessions at short notice or cancelling sessions at short notice.

However, while services may offer flexible sessions, this is not necessarily coupled with flexible enrolments in those sessions. This is particularly prevalent amongst services requiring notice of changes to enrolment, to enable the service to work out staffing arrangements ahead of time.

Broadly, early childhood services showed a high degree of flexibility in relation to enrolment changes. However, services showed less flexibility in relation to cancelling sessions at short notice and relatively greater flexibility in making arrangements to change existing arrangements or book new sessions.

**Table 11. Changes to enrolment**

Services were asked about changes to enrolment from a list of possible options.

	<b>LDC</b>	<b>FDC Educators</b>	<b>FDC Service</b>	<b>OSHC</b>	<b>IHC</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Can swap days</b>	55.9%	54.4%	76.8%	72.8%	91.3%	57.1%
<b>Can change the number of days in care</b>	76.0%	67.0%	82.1%	81.6%	82.6%	78.6%
<b>Can change days at short notice</b>	45.9%	39.8%	57.1%	65.8%	82.6%	54.8%
<b>Can change hours at short notice</b>	24.8%	59.2%	60.7%	32.5%	69.6%	47.6%
<b>Can book additional sessions at short notice</b>	75.7%	65.0%	66.1%	88.6%	82.6%	73.8%
<b>Can cancel sessions at short notice</b>	29.0%	29.1%	37.5%	60.5%	60.9%	50.0%
<b>Other</b>	4.2%	7.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.9%

In-home care services reported more flexible enrolment practices in most areas, particularly in swapping days or changing days at short notice. The highly tailored nature of in-home care to an individual family's needs may be a contributing factor. Interestingly, family day care, although more flexible than long day care in enrolment, did not provide as greater flexibility for families in enrolment in many areas listed.

Outside school hours care services showed the greatest level of flexibility in relation to booking additional sessions at short notice. This may be due to greater availability of spaces and the larger group/s sizes of these services.

### Case Study: Wonderland Outside School Hours Care, WA

Wonderland Outside School Hours Care in the Perth suburb of Duncraig works with a wide variety of parents to provide flexible enrolment patterns. Centre manager Adam Van Den Beuken says they often cater for shift workers including 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) workers, police, nurses and retail workers.

'We will book their kids in according to the FIFO roster. So if it's two and one, they'll come two weeks and not the third and they're not charged for it', Adam says.

Staffing these arrangements can be a challenge, as the service needs to pay for the number of staff to meet the ratios, even if a smaller number of children are present. With a small number of families requiring the flexible enrolment patterns offered by the service, this arrangement is 'manageable' and can be absorbed by the service.

'I used to be a shift worker so I know it's not an easy role to pull off so for them ... if need be we will book according to their roster and sometimes we don't know what their roster is until the Friday before', Adam says.

Some shift workers have had more volatile shift patterns, but the service has worked with the families to accommodate this by booking in children anyway and if the sessions are not used, parents were not charged.

Vacation care is also offered at the service catering for around 50 children a day with July holidays being the busiest period. The number of children may vary.

'We expect about 50 so when I initially send out the roster we'll have four [staff] throughout the day. And then as it looks like the day's going to go through that, I'll add another one the week before. Sometimes we have up to nine staff on so I'm very quickly adding on more staff. We're lucky that our staff are flexible', Adam says.

#### Tips

- Communicate with families around their care needs and be open to supporting parents, particularly shift workers, to provide extra flexibility.
- Understand the level of flexibility that your service can offer, and be clear with families about these arrangements.

Some long day care services commented that a defined period of notice had to be given to make changes or cancel sessions. The notice period varied across services from seven days to two weeks, though some services took into account the need for emergency changes.

*Parents are encouraged to give two weeks' notice but to be family friendly each case is taken on its merits.*

Nominated Supervisor, long day care service,  
metropolitan NSW

This suggests that services with vacancies have greater capacity to offer flexibility in relation to enrolment.

### Barriers to flexible enrolment

Services offering flexible enrolment may also find it difficult to roster staff appropriately if there are changes at short notice. This may not be a problem where adequate staff are already available to cover staff to child ratios and there are free spaces.

Flexibility in enrolment is also highly contingent on spaces being available in services to accommodate changes, particularly at short notice. Services with high occupancy rates, such as long day care, may find it comparatively difficult to provide flexible enrolment families. A significant number of services commented that their flexibility in relation to enrolment patterns was heavily dependent on the occupancy of their service.

*Parents can swap days if they are available. If not they have to wait [until] the day they need becomes available.*

Director, long day care service, metropolitan Qld

*Within reason—we do have an extensive waitlist, so not a ‘simple’ change.*

Director, outside school hours care service, metropolitan NSW

*We are able (enough staff and enough space) to be flexible so parents can book their children in on short notice.*

Director, outside school hours care service, metropolitan Qld

Some services, particularly in long day care, may choose to quarantine a small number of places. These places can then be used to accommodate changes to enrolment by families. While this provides extra flexibility for families that are already enrolled in the service, it may impact on service utilisation overall.

There are also benefits for early childhood services in adopting flexible enrolment practices. If children are away, this may provide an opening to other families to temporarily change days or hours.

Technology may be the answer in allowing services and parents to improve enrolment flexibility. For example applications that show available places/hours in real time.

### **Case Study: Dorothy Waide Early Learning Centre, NSW**

Dorothy Waide Early Learning Centre in the regional town of Griffith, NSW has implemented flexible sessions of care for families.

Previously, the centre operated on an 11 hour session per day which meant that parents had to pay for the full session of care, even if they used less hours.

Centre Director, Neville Dwyer says that the Centre then decided to offer parents the ability to pay for the time that they use.

‘So we actually divide the day into technically three time zones, a six hour day, an eight hour day and an eight hours plus day, and that gave parents the ability to choose what pattern suits them’, Neville says.

The trigger for the change was that parents were moving away from using the Centre’s preschool program, because children were in care for the full 11 hour day, and parents wanted shorter hours which were being delivered at other services.

The key to implementing the flexible sessions is the centre’s ability to tailor the roster around the busy periods of the day, based on parents’ preferences.

‘So I have the base level of staff across the opening and closing part of the day, then I bring all my staff in as the children come in’, Neville says.

‘That reduces my costs, which essentially reduces the cost for the parent, otherwise I have to staff the place with the potential that everyone could turn up.’

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

This method does not adversely affect utilisation as the overall hours available are reduced as well as the total hours paid for each child.

The roster was developed from a spreadsheet which automatically works out how many staff are needed during different times of the day, based on the sessions the parents have chosen for their child.

'It's about tracking your day and actually understanding where all the costs are', says Neville.

The service is now trialling a new smartphone app which is linked to programming and planning documentation. The app allows parents to notify of absences, additional casual days and also provides a forum for other communication. This feeds into each playroom and is monitored throughout the day. This provides parents with the ability to make flexible choices around enrolment. At the service end, this can quickly be reflected in revised staffing rosters.



**Tips**

- Understand where your costs are, especially wage costs which drive child care prices.
- Look at what rostering technologies can help to reduce wage costs and provide extra flexibility for families.

# Flexible location

The location of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is an important aspect of flexibility for families. Flexible location may mean co-location with services used by the family or it could mean other kinds of assistance with the location of the service such as help with transport or mobile delivery of early childhood services.

## Co-location

Co-locating services can provide convenience to families to access other services. Models of

co-location may differ with different levels of integration between services. Integrated family support services are usually planned services incorporating a range of different service types including ECEC. Co-located services may also operate separately with links or partnerships with other providers. Others may benefit from co-location even if no formal relationships exist with adjacent services.

Various models of corporate governance also may apply, with all services run by one organisation or many organisations working together in the model.

**Table 12. Services operating from a flexible location**

Services were asked if they were co-located with the following services.

	LDC	OSHC	Preschool	Other
<b>Health service</b>	6.8%	0.9%	9.8%	19.0%
<b>Family/parenting support services</b>	6.5%	3.5%	10.3%	33.3%
<b>University/TAFE</b>	3.9%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%
<b>On-site ECEC in parents' workplace</b>	3.9%	4.3%	2.2%	0.0%
<b>With another early childhood education and care service</b>	6.5%	5.2%	6.3%	14.3%
<b>School</b>	11.5%	82.6%	17.9%	11.9%
<b>Business</b>	2.9%	2.6%	0.4%	4.8%
<b>Other</b>	8.6%	3.5%	11.6%	19.0%

## Educational institution based services

Co-location with other educational institutions enables parents to drop off older siblings at the same time, avoiding the need for a 'double drop off' and 'double pick up' in the morning and afternoon. Despite these efficiencies for parents, most services are not located with another service or organisation, with the exception of outside school hours care services which are mostly located with schools. Some preschools and kindergartens were also commonly located with schools.

## Schools and outside school hours care

Outside school hours care services are run to support families with children before and after school and during school vacation periods. As a result they are typically co-located with schools and are inherently flexible in this regard. However, co-location is often a starting point for greater collaboration with benefits for children, families and schools.

### **Case Study: Windsor School Age Care Centre, Qld**

Windsor School Age Care Centre in Brisbane is located adjacent to the grounds St Mary of The Cross Catholic school.

Children also come from Windsor State school located across a busy road. Staff provide a 'walking bus' helping children walk children across a busy road and safely access the centre and the school.

Katheryn Mahoney, Centre Director, says that the flexibility of the service is the strong partnership with St Mary of The Cross Catholic school. The quality of the OSHC and its integration with the curriculum is seen as a vital part of the school's overall appeal to families.

Windsor not only occupies its own premises backing onto the school, but children in the service are also able to access school grounds and facilities including sporting facilities and the library and canteen after hours to run programs and offer children an afternoon meal.

The service provides a wide variety of programming for children, offering music lessons, foreign language classes and sporting tuition based on children's interests. A partnership with Tennis Australia offered on the school's tennis courts was initially arranged with the school National Schools Partnership Program, but is now being delivered by through the OSHC, supporting children's health and wellbeing.

#### **Tips**

- Collaborative partnerships with the school can strengthen programming and quality benefiting children, families and the school.
- Look for opportunities to integrate school curriculum and provide leisure based activities through outside school hours care.



### **Case Study: Cambridge Primary School Outside School Hours Care, Vic.**

When Cathy Lucifero volunteered to help one afternoon at her son's after school care program—'in the days before qualifications and quality frameworks'—she had no idea she would still be there 18 years later.

Since that time Cathy has gone from being an untrained casual to the qualified co-ordinator of the program. And she has seen the service go from a 30-place after school care program to a flexible, expanded group of programs responsive to the needs of children and families in the school and the community beyond it.

Located in the outer Melbourne suburb of Hoppers Crossing, the after school care program at Cambridge Primary School now offers 120 places and an enthusiastic engaged team of educators. Between 80 and 115 children attend at the close of any one school day.

Nine years ago Before School care was added with between 25 and 50 children enjoying activities and a wide range of tasty breakfasts each morning. Then, as other school vacation care programs in the area were struggling for numbers or closing, Cambridge OSHC added a 75-place vacation care program five years ago. Last holidays it was fully booked including with children from nearby schools. Cathy thinks it will probably need to offer places for 90 children next holidays.

Cathy believes this caring and collaborative approach by the principal and the school council are vital to the flexibility and success of the program. The relationships are based on trust and sharing resources. The school council is supportive, interested but not intrusive.

'They put a lot of trust in us ... They let us run it and they know if there's going to be a problem we would go and talk to them', Cathy says.

The OSHC program can spend up to \$1000 before seeking approval from the school council. This flexible approach allows Cathy to take quick decisive action to respond to needs without waiting on lengthy processes.

Funds from OSHC have contributed to school infrastructure, helping to buy playground sunshades, mobile tablets and even buildings. The demountable purchased for OSHC can be used by teachers during the school day.

Cathy also likes to meet and know all families before they enrol. The team attends school information nights and Cathy meets every family outside Cambridge PS that wants to use the vacation care program. Every year the children's families are invited for an afternoon of cake, coffee and tea to see for themselves what happens in OSHC. They have a chance to discuss their child's portfolio and any problems or issues they may have.

Cambridge OSHC helps families manage their flexible work patterns. When shift work and other unexpected demands for care arise, parents only need to text Cathy during the day. She does the rest. She gives a brief text response, notifies the child's teacher and arranges for the child to attend after school care. Parents don't need to do anything extra. She also explains to the child when these short notice changes occur. There is no charge for this service and the program does not distinguish in fees between permanent and casual bookings as many other services do. In this way shift workers and those with the most marginal employment arrangements are not financially disadvantaged.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

Perhaps that's the key to success at Cambridge Outside School Hours Care: the responsiveness of Cathy and her team. They put the needs of children and families first. When the children have choice, are happy and engaged, parents can get on with what they need to do.

'It was hard putting all the regs and qualifications in ... but at the end it pays off', Cathy says. Some staff did not want to study and moved on. The current OSHC team, through their training, seem more engaged with the program. Cathy thinks they 'have a better understanding of what should be in the program and how it should be run and giving kids choices and flexibility. I think it's made them more aware'. She can delegate to the team more, which in turn gives children greater choice in the program and in staff interaction.

Cathy could see that training had helped the team link daily activities with goals. 'When the staff met to dissect our philosophy statement they realised what we do was in our statement. It was a bit of an eye opener for them', Cathy says.

**Tips**

- Build strong relationships with families.
- Maintain a trusting relationship with the school management and between the OSHC program, the school and the families.

While the proportion of OSHC services co-located with schools is high, OSHC services report that many schools are not interested in delivering OSHC co-located services to families and it may be perceived as outside of the core business of delivering school education. Often engagement is dependent on the interest of school principal, board or parents and citizens council.

The importance of co-located OSHC services in delivering flexibility for families is critical from government and the community and should not be dependent on the school's interest in providing these services. The Productivity Commission has recommended that 'state and territory governments should direct all schools to take responsibility for organising the provision of an outside school hours care service for their students (including students in attached preschools), where demand is sufficiently large for a service to be viable' (2014, p. 337). While this recommendation supports the outcome of further OSHC provision within schools, it assumes schools have the expertise or ability to effectively organise and or contract OSHC services effectively.

Guidance is required in relation to many aspects of OSHC provision within schools, such as tendering criteria and decision making, facility use, service quality, and fostering greater collaborative partnerships between OSHC services, the school and families. The development of guidelines for schools covering these issues would provide a strong basis for improvements in OSHC delivery on school sites. The guidelines would provide a framework for schools in responding to a direction to deliver new co-located services, and to improve the delivery of existing co-located services in a way that meets children's and families' needs.

**Recommendation 10: State and territory governments and non-government school authorities should develop guidelines for the delivery of outside school hours care services on school sites.**

## Schools and long day care

Only a small number of long day care services are co-located with schools, despite the benefits for families with multiple children of different ages. Other residual

benefits include the links that early childhood services can make with local schools to improve transitions of children into kindergarten/prep, and to arrange school visits, and use of resources such as libraries and other facilities.

### **Case Study: Franklin Early Childhood School, ACT**

Franklin Early Childhood School is a new centre built by the ACT Government which opened in 2012. The site incorporates a kindergarten to Year 2 school, preschool and long day care and outside school hours care services.

The long day care service run by Anglicare incorporates 174 places. Centre Director, Vivienne Gould, says that the idea of the centre is to provide a community for families.

'the model is in order to provide flexibility for families to provide a hub where we not only provide childcare and school, but there's a community environment, there are support services for families, there's a whole lot of other stuff that can happen', Vivienne says.

One of the main benefits for families is the flexibility of providing a single point of drop off for families.

'So we have quite a few families ... where they've got a child in the nursery, a child going to preschool and someone in Year 2. So they are accessing everything that we're offering. We have families then who will only be accessing the preschool and after school care, and then are going to Mother Teresa or Bergman, or the private schools around. We have a huge range, very diverse.'

While the long day care centre is open from 7.30 am to 6.00 pm, the preschool only operates from 9.00 am until 3.00 pm. This means children can transition between the preschool and the long day care service during the day.

'So some families will come full time, they will utilise before and after preschool, as well as the long days on the opposite days. Some families may only come for one afternoon session a fortnight, depending on their work arrangements. It's very flexible.'

Children that attend the preschool and long day care service are placed in an integrated preschool room so that they interact with the same children.

Vivienne says that one of the benefits for children is the transition to school.

'The students are familiar, so they start with us and they're familiar with the layout and the staff, they see their teachers. So it's an easy transition to go from one to the other, Vivienne says.

Integrating all of the services was initially a challenge despite co-location in the building. The services worked together collaboratively to ensure that the space was being utilised effectively based on demand from families. The key was communication. Regular meetings are held with the school principal and the community coordinator to ensure the centre was meeting the evolving needs of families accessing the hub.

The preschool and the long day care centre also regulate communication with each other about programming for children under the *Early Years Learning Framework* to ensure there are consistent and complimentary approaches to children's learning based on children's interests.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

The service does find it a challenge to attract and retain staff, but the ability to employ staff across the out of school hours care services and the long day care services makes it easier in offering staff flexible hours.

Anglicare is now looking at adopting a similar co-located preschool/long day care model with a private school in Googong in Southern NSW.

**Tips**

- Look at opportunities to co-locate services with schools and other community services.
- Look closely at the physical design and environment and ensure that these spaces can be used flexibly by different services.
- Establish regular communication channels with services involved in the integrated model both at the management level and in programming.
- Always be on the lookout for new opportunities to strengthen collaboration with other services.
- Develop clear and precise policy around aspects of flexible service delivery to embed these practices with staff.



The above case study provides an example of how forward planning was undertaken to co-locate services. Historically, planning has not always supported the co-location of long day care and school sites. However, there is still an opportunity to support this model retrospectively in some locations.

The *Best Practice Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities* (ACELG, 2014) suggests that by unlocking land for ECEC use, this not only creates space for early childhood services (where places are needed) but also supports co-location objectives.

**Excerpt from the *Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities***

Identifying under-utilised land.

In Australia, local governments have the capacity to identify areas of under-utilised land (such as crown land, retired defence reserves or disused industrial land) which may be 'unlocked' to become available for child care centres, and to work together with other spheres of government to achieve this. Local governments often have established relationships with agency representatives at the local/regional scale which can prove to be vital in securing partnerships for co-location of child care with other related facilities.

Further, local governments can be pivotal in identifying development opportunities for their local communities particularly in relation to employment generation or meeting the needs of target populations.

Improving the planning of co-located early childhood services with schools is important to address availability and flexibility concerns. The *Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities* provides a foundation for a review of planning policies and regulations as well as approaches to land sale and release where appropriate for early childhood uses.

**Recommendation 11: That state and territory governments, local governments and non-government school authorities explore opportunities to identify land adjacent to or on school sites for the development of co-located early childhood services.**

**Recommendation 12: That state and territory governments, local governments review planning policies and regulations based on the *Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities*.**

## Health services

Health services also provide convenience of access to families and enable a 'soft entry' to these services, particularly for families who are not engaged in the service system.

*We are located in a Community Hub [with] a Medical Centre and Maternal Child Health Centre.*

Director, long day care service, regional Vic.

## ECEC in the workplace

The provision of centre-based ECEC services in or near the workplace is often considered to be flexible for families.

The benefits for families include:

- removing the need to leave to or from work early to travel a long distance to access ECEC
- reducing stress in dropping off children to centres located a distance from work
- the availability of early childhood education and care places. These may be quarantined for employees in certain cases under Family Tax Benefit exemptions
- enabling parents to have contact with the child during work hours, especially for nursing mothers
- being able to interact with children during commutes to and from work.

Only small numbers of services including 3.9 per cent of long day care services provided on-site ECEC, with 2.9 per cent located next to businesses. This may suggest complexities in establishing centre-based services, despite the benefits for employers.

### Case Study: Lorikeet Early Learning Centre, NSW

Lorikeet Early Learning Centre, which is owned by the NSW Government, is located adjacent to St George Hospital, South Eastern Sydney Local Health.

The centre provides 56 places, with an extended hours care model to support medical staff at the local hospital. The centre opens from 6.45 am to 10.30 pm at night. While the centre is CCB approved, the Government subsidises the service to provide flexible hours for hospital staff.

Centre Director, Lorrae Grants says that demand for the services varies depending on the shifts.

'So our Policy is that parents with children enrolled at the Centre are entitled to care hours based on their shifts.'

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

The Centre is strict in ensuring that care is only provided across shift and not at other times. Families on rotating rosters provide staff with their rosters ahead of time so the services can see what times are needed.

The evening care session is from 12.30 to 10.30 pm. Lorrae says that there are usually around four to six children attending during the evening.

'We have two dedicated evening care staff so they always work the evening shift and that helps to provide the consistency for the children that are in that program', Lorrae says.

Routines and programming for children is different in the evening to reflect the time of the day. Sleep routines are determined on a case by case basis taking into account the age of the child and their parent's shift patterns.

'They will do activities just like you would during the day so they'll do painting, they'll do play doh, they'll do messy play, they'll have dancing, they'll do language activities. It would normally just be a little less active obviously as the evening goes on because you want them to settle down and they will go to bed', Lorrae says.

While it has been challenging in the past to find staff to work during the evening, the service has managed to find staff that are happy to work those hours.

The nature of emergency services roles can mean that families are called away unexpectedly. The centre caters for these changes, and can take children at short notice, though this is not frequent.

One of the major advantages of being co-located with the hospital is that families can visit including nursing mothers during their break, if they have the opportunity.

**Tips**

- Look at opportunities to form partnerships with workplaces including funding to implement flexible practices.
- Think about how programming and routines need to be adjusted during the evenings.
- Communicate with families about their care needs.

### **Case Study: Darling View Early Learning Centre and Queen's View Early Learning Centre, NSW**

Darling View Early Learning Centre and Queen's View Early Learning Centre, owned by Guardian Early Learning Group, are separately licensed co-located early education centres operating from a large commercial office block in the centre of Sydney's CBD.

Darling View Early Learning Centre and Queen's View Early Learning Centre both have corporate partners and the centres form part of wider corporate strategies to promote work/life balance and flexibility for their staff. The services' philosophy focuses on understanding of the support working families require by providing families with information sessions, opportunities to engage in events and excursions and building and maintaining meaningful and collaborative relationships.

Parents working with these companies benefit from priority of access to places at the service which are quarantined for the corporate partner. This guarantee reduces the level of stress that families who are returning to work feel, they have the assurance that their child will be allocated a space in an environment that is well regarded by their place of employment. Both the services are in high demand and currently operate at full occupancy.

The services also provide access to families enrolling from the community. A large majority of these families work in organisations that are within walking distance to the services. A free 20 minute drop off zone is also provided for families who travel by car into the CBD.

The service regards the ongoing relationship with the corporate partners is equally as important as the relationships with children, families and educators. The relationship is one based on openness and honesty, the centre managers and senior management meet with the corporate client on a quarterly basis. This meeting is generally structured with agenda items covering a range of topics.

Nadia Kemister, General Manager NSW says that there are often meetings, events and conversations that are held on a more informal and sporadic basis.

'If we've got a family concern or a family coming in from overseas or something that they actually need they will pick up [the phone] and talk to us just as freely. So it is a very open relationship and it needs to be through every level of the service, from the corporate right down', Nadia says.

NSW Operations Manager, Kristie Wilson says families have responded well to the flexibility of having early childhood services located next to where they work.

'This provides them with a confidence and level of security that they can always pop down to visit their children throughout the day. Mothers that are still nursing their babies are very grateful for our open door policy and location as this means they can easily walk down at the times their baby needs to be fed. The educators and families have great relationships and often educators will ring the families when their child is becoming a little unsettled, and due for their feed.'

Rather than the central location posing a challenge, the centres have thrived in the CBD environment. Both the services have outdoor play areas located safely on the terrace of the second floor, and the centre's proximity to Sydney's CBD means that there are a wealth of institutions and environments for children to visit within walking distance. The educators take children on regular excursions, where they are able to interact and engage with the local community and they are never short of family volunteers. The services are careful to comply with the excursion guidelines.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

Staffing at the services has not been a huge challenge. The central location makes the services an attractive place to work, with adequate public transport meaning that educators can travel from anywhere to go to work.

As most families with children attending the centre are working in office roles, a large majority of children are in the service for long periods of the day. The centre operates from 7.30 am to 6.00 pm. While the service is always talking to families about whether the opening hours are meeting their needs, according to the centres' managers, there isn't the demand to extend opening hours. The benefit of having a co-located centre is that families don't need the extra time to commute to get their child.

In the mornings, this also means that families are not as rushed giving the educators an opportunity to develop and maintain strong partnerships with families during this time. The services run a breakfast service where the families can come in and interact with other families, have breakfast with their child before heading off to work. This is a time where families and educators can interact, raise concerns, provide feedback or discuss recent successes, relationships are fundamental and embracing every opportunity to strengthen these is a priority.

'So it's a really nice time for families to get to know each other, to build relationships, to talk with the educators, spend time with their family and their child', Nadia says.

### **Tips**

- Research your area, understand who your families are and their needs.
- Look at the opportunities that centrally located services can provide for promoting children's learning and collaboration with families.
- Be careful to understand the corporate 'control' requirements for on-site early childhood services under Fringe Benefits Tax law.
- Build strong relationships with corporate clients and meet regularly to discuss employee needs.
- Become conversant in technical requirements for on-site ECEC including the building code, and re-check these requirements.





## Benefits for employers

Employers who are able to co-locate with early childhood services can benefit from providing staff with 'family friendly' policies. The provision of access to early childhood education and care can enhance productivity of its employees, by securing workforce attachment and ensuring that business investment in the skills of its employees are not lost.

Employers may be interested in employer supported ECEC (Childcare At Work Australia, 1995):

- To retain valued employees by broadening the range of employee benefits
- To increase workforce productivity by assisting employees to balance their work and family responsibilities more effectively
- To retain valued female employees after maternity leave
- To reduce absenteeism and tardiness
- To assist with recruiting skilled workers

- To improve the employer's image in the community
- To conform to affirmative action reporting requirements
- To improve equal employment opportunities for women
- To adapt to changing labour force demographics
- To change the workforce culture to a more participatory style of management.

Other considerations for employer interest may be:

- To form part of a strategy for workplace reform
- To maximise taxation benefits.

## Barriers

### Taxation benefits

Taxation benefits are one of the main incentives for corporations to become engaged in on-site child care arrangements.

### Excerpt from *Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986—Section 47*

the benefit is an *exempt benefit*.

(2) Where:

(a) a residual benefit provided to a current employee in respect of his or her employment consists of:

- (i) the provision, or use, of a recreational facility; or
- (ii) the care of children of the employee in a child care facility; and

(b) the recreational facility or child care facility, as the case may be, is located on business premises of:

- (i) the employer; or
- (ii) if the employer is a company, of the employer or of a company that is related to the employer;

Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986—Section 47 (8)

(8) If:

(a) a residual benefit provided in respect of the employment of an employee arose out of priority of access, for a child or children of the employee, to:

- (i) a place that is an eligible child care centre for the purposes of any provision of the *Child Care Act 1972*; or

*Excerpt continued on next page*

*Excerpt continued*

- (ii) family day care provided before the commencement of item 1 of Schedule 10 to the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Consequential and Related Measures) Act (No. 2) 1999*; or
- (iii) care outside school hours provided before the commencement of item 1 of Schedule 10 to the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Consequential and Related Measures) Act (No. 2) 1999*; or
- (iv) care in school vacations provided before the commencement of item 1 of Schedule 10 to the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Consequential and Related Measures) Act (No. 2) 1999*; or
- (v) an approved centre based long day care service within the meaning of the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999*; or
- (vi) an approved family day care service within the meaning of the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999*; or
- (vii) an approved outside school hours care service within the meaning of the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999*; or
- (viii) an approved in-home care service within the meaning of the *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999*; and

(b) in order to obtain that priority of access, the employer of the employee, or an associate of the employer, made a contribution under a program administered by the Families Department;

the residual benefit is an exempt benefit.

However, these complex rules are outdated, overly restrictive, and beset with uncertainty (McMillan Shakespeare, 2014, p. 4). Part of the problem is that under Section 47(2) employers must have 'control' which transfers the risk of the early childhood service on to the employer instead of the child care provider. It also means that companies wanting to establish an on-site ECEC facility in a 'joint-venture' are restricted from doing so.

The complexity involved may therefore act as a disincentive for employers to either not engage with childcare support due to the high cost of compliance.

The Australian Industry Group's (AIG) submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry recommended that consideration be given to extending the FBT exemption to allow more joint-venture employer childcare facilities (AIG, p. 11–12).

**Excerpt from *McMillan Shakespeare—  
submission to the Productivity  
Commission (2014)***

To be granted FBT-exempt status, the employer needs to ensure they comply with stringent requirements demonstrating control when establishing relevant management agreements and site rental agreements, as prescribed by the ATO in Taxation Ruling TR 2000/4, and supply to the ATO all relevant documents and contracts for the ATO's consideration of any private ruling seeking confirmation of FBT exemption status.

Regardless of whether their childcare facility is 'on-site' or 'off-site', many employers have failed to obtain FBT-exempt status because the ATO is not convinced they control the facility.

While the Productivity Commission has recommended removing Section 47(2) from the *Fringe Benefits Tax Act 1986* in its Draft Report (Recommendation 12.1) this would leave little incentive for employers to support the provision of co-located early childhood services.

**Recommendation 13: Amend Section 47(2) of the *Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986* (the FBT Act) to lower the barriers against employers joining together to provide FBT-exempt childcare facilities to employees.**

### **Case Study: Martin Place Early Learning Centre, NSW**

Martin Place Early Learning Centre is a brand new Early learning Centre owned by Guardian Early Learning Group, it is situated in Sydney's Martin Place. Similar to many of Guardian's Corporate centres it is an on-site service operating from a large commercial office block in the centre of Sydney's CBD.

As the centre was retrofitted into an existing commercial office block, the design had to be flexible to accommodate the needs of children within the building.

The centre is fortunate enough to have an outdoor terrace to use as real outdoor space—a luxury in the CBD. Due to the size of the area, the service had to design and create outdoor simulated space indoors. A large amount of consideration was given to how the indoor space could be used. For example whether the indoor space could be safely used for children's activities which would ordinarily be undertaken outside, such as throwing a ball, skipping or running.

The result is a tribute to flexible design, with indoor gardens, grass, sandpits and tanbark pits fully utilising the natural light flowing through the large windows that each side of the building has.

## **Building workplace child care centres**

Some local governments require consideration of early childhood centres as part of development applications for multi-storey buildings, though this is not common. Incorporating early childhood services into commercial spaces can often be difficult due to a range of requirements that need to be in place. However, these challenges often need to be overcome to improve the availability and co-location of services in the inner city.

The environment outside acts as a fantastic backdrop and is complimentary to the inside design.

New South Wales Operations Manager, Kristie Wilson, says that there are a large number of operational requirements providers need meet, 'it is quite a complex process that requires a significant amount of knowledge and experience to plan for a compliant, effective and engaging service that children, families and educators will thrive in'.

'Moving into commercial space can be tricky, you need to consider airflow, exposure to natural light, natural elements and, if you are to have active play areas, consideration must be given to fall heights—there is an enormous amount of work that goes in to designing such spaces', Kristie says.



## Delivering services to another location

Only a small number of long day care services said that they delivered services to a flexible location, with 85.1 per cent not delivering ECEC to a flexible location, including transport, remote and mobile services as well as on-site care.

**Table 13. Services delivering to a flexible location**

Services were asked if they delivered services to a flexible location.

	LDC	FDC Educator	OSHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Mobile services</b>	1.0%	4.8%	0.9%	2.2%	7.1%
<b>Transport services</b>	5.2%	34.6%	7.78%	4.9%	4.8%
<b>Remote services</b>	1.0%	–	0.9%	1.8%	9.5%
<b>Other</b>	3.1%	3.8%	2.6%	3.6%	11.9%

## Transport

Transport services can remove the need for parents to take time out to facilitate the transition of children between preschool/kindergarten, schools, the early childhood service and home.

Transport is offered by some early childhood services to provide flexibility for families. While transport services were offered by long day care, more commonly these were offered as part of outside school hours care services.

*We pick up and drop off children for families that don't have transport.*

Administrator, long day care service, regional Tas.

Not all OSHC services have the benefit of co-location with a school. OSHC services may also be unviable or unavailable at some schools. This means that transport may be required for children to OSHC services located at other schools or facilities.

### Case Study: Wonderland Outside School Hours Care, WA

Wonderland Outside School Hours Care in the Perth suburb of Duncraig provides before and after school care for children from a range of different schools. It is located within the Duncraig community centre.

The service operates seven mini-buses picking up children from seven schools. Often one school will require two buses depending on the number of children. Despite the cost of purchasing the buses, Centre Director, Adam Van Den Beuken says the running costs are reasonable. 'They don't travel far. You're looking at a maximum of 5000 kilometres over a year so your running costs are quite low', Adam says.

While there are other outside school hours care services in the area, these are often full, so the service has an important role in providing extra places for parents.

Some early childhood services provide 'mobile services', deriving programs and establishing play spaces in a range of locations. Many of these are funded under the Commonwealth Government's Budget Based Funded (BBF) programme, delivering services to remote communities.

## Remote services

There are particular challenges in delivering ECEC in remote locations where work patterns can be quite different to metropolitan areas.

### **Case Study: CSSU Early Learning Centre Pannawonica, WA**

The Children's Services Support Unit (CSSU) was approached by Rio Tinto to establish a long day care service in the remote mining community of Pannawonica in Western Australia, three hours South West of Karratha.

Pannawonica is a closed community of 698 people for Rio Tinto employees and their families, with no private accommodation.

Most parents are employed at the local mines and work a roster with eight days on and six days off. Therefore, families do not need the care provided while they are on their off days and often travel away to Perth or overseas.

Pannawonica ELC previously operated as an occasional care service but was only open until 2.00 pm. It was re-licensed by CSSU to become an approved long day care service and is licensed for 24 children opening from 8.00 am–4.00 pm.

Rio Tinto provides direct support to the service to employ three staff on a permanent basis. Housing support is also provided.

Pannawonica Early Learning Centre works around the rostered shifts of families. In a typical fortnight, a parent may have four booked days one week and the following week have only two booked days. Families can also enrol for half days (8.00 am–12.00 pm) or full day care (8.00 am–4.00 pm) depending on the availability of the spouse.

After school care is available for children from kindergarten to age 12.

Nannies employed by parents pick up some of the children and provide care for the child in a home environment until the end of their shifts. Some of these nannies are educators at the service, employed privately after hours to care for their children.

Director Wendy Cook says that the nature of shift-work can often be difficult for children and that children's stable relationship, with educators at the service are important.

'There's a lot of inconsistency in their lives, so that's why we try and make day care a safe and familiar place', Wendy says.

CSSU originally trialled standard billing practices to accommodate families including booking permanent days and families paying for absences. However, following discussions with parents, this was changed to a more flexible user-pays model.

Staffing is the greatest long-term issue faced by the service. Due to the remote location it is difficult to find qualified staff. The service has worked hard to provide a stable staffing which has enabled the

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implementation of flexible practices. Three staff are on site at all times and the service also utilises a casual staff member when needed.

The remote location of the centre often creates difficulties in managing the work/life balance of staff. As staff often do not see the children's parents face to face during opening hours, parents frequently approach staff during non-work hours to discuss their child's progress. The centre manages this through greater communication through texts, phone calls and set meetings to discuss issues with the child.

### Tips

- Provide a thorough induction meeting for prospective families enrolling in a tailored service.
- Communicate directly with parents at the service. If this is not possible face to face, call the parent to discuss any issue with the children or in the service.
- Be aware of external instability in children's lives and provide them with a stable environment.



### Case Study: Lady Gowrie Oatlands and Swansea, Tas.

Lady Gowrie provides care in several regional towns including Swansea and Oatlands, Tasmania.

Lady Gowrie CEO, Ros Cornish, says that demand can change depending on the time of year.

'Oatlands is a rural centre and the farming community is seasonal, so when the crops are planted or during harvesting time, the centre is busy', says Ros.

Swansea is a tourist town on the coast, but in winter there is low demand for services and it rarely has permanent bookings. As a result, the two centres have to offer flexible sessions to accommodate families.

They operate like occasional care or a 'drop in' services instead of charging for a full long day.

Ros says that while the business services for the model would otherwise be unviable, 'our Board have made a judgment as a not-for-profit community organisation a commitment to social inclusion, they have a social conscience that if we weren't there they wouldn't have a service at all, because a private operator wouldn't go there because it's not viable'.

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The key is the flexibility of staff who can accommodate slow periods working with small groups of children in isolation. To support their work, staff often travel to Hobart for professional development.

'We've just started a little network for those staff, because they do work in isolation to some degree', says Ros.

### **Tips**

- Consider how flexible sessions support the viability of small services in regional areas.
- Think about how staff can be supported in situations where they are working in isolation of other staff.



### **Case Study: Northern Children's Network, Tas.**

Northern Children's Network is the largest family day care service in Tasmania, with 230 in-home care and family day care educators.

Sallie Hextall, Director of Home Based Care Services, says that the service has developed a range of innovative approaches to family day care service delivery.

The service purchased a house in Launceston which caters for in-venue family day care for educators without a house of their own that is suitable to operate a service. The purpose of the house was to enable educators to care for children and deliver programs to support vulnerable children and families in the community of Prospect, Tasmania. The house is a registered family day care premises and educators live on site.

Northern Children's Network is also running four 'dual-educator' family day care models to support vulnerable families.

'It's just two completely separately run businesses, but they're just under the one roof', Sallie says.

The family day care educator services share playground facilities.

## In-venue care

Family Day Care (FDC) in-venue care is where FDC is provided in a venue other than an educator's home. This may be advantageous for variety of reasons, including that the educator is not able to conduct care in their own home.

The model may provide flexibility for services in delivering care, often where long day care is unavailable or unviable in the area, with small group sizes.

Of family day care educators surveyed, 9.6 per cent offered in-venue care. This seems to be greater than expected and may show an overrepresentation of these arrangements.

The Family Assistance Law is unclear to what extent in-venue care is allowed in the child's home. If these practices are sanctioned, then there is little practical difference between family day care and in-home care. Of family day care services, 11.9 per cent stated that they delivered ECEC in the child's home.

**Recommendation 14: The regulations in relation to family day care educators providing in-venue care in the child's home are not clear and further clarification would be useful to services to explore this option.**



# Meeting the broader needs of the family

The concept of flexibility also extends to how children's and families' needs are being met holistically. This may include broader needs than early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Children's development may be influenced by their experiences and the context of their immediate families, informal networks and the local community.

As described in the ecological model of child development, access to a range of 'appropriate services in the community has a significant influence on children's development' (Sanson, et al, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The prevalence of these community services may act as a protective factor for children and families who are at risk.

## Building collaborative partnerships with families and communities

Early childhood educators may not have the expertise to support children's and families' holistic needs, but early childhood services have a role to play in improving collaboration between community organisations, networks and services.

Early childhood services are important community hubs, and can provide a point of referral or 'soft entry' for hard to reach families with children in care.

*Educators often have families coming to them who do not have contacts within the local community—we are their contact and they rely on us to support them in identifying services, programs to help their parenting, and support for any medical or family needs.*

Director, Long day care service, Qld

While formal 'integrated early childhood services' have been established in some jurisdictions, all

early childhood services can have a role in building partnerships to better meet the needs of families. This collaborative approach is also linked to the quality of early childhood services, reflected in *National Quality Standard* Quality Area 6 'Collaborative partnerships with families and communities'.

## Assessing community need

Some local communities have formed early childhood networks to bring together a range of community services to focus on supporting children and families in the local community.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides important contextual information about children's development. The AEDC Community Profiles can provide a catalyst for childhood services to begin discussions with their local schools and community organisations and may indicate where partnerships can be formed to improve children's outcomes in areas of vulnerability.

Other data sets may also help to understand the community, socioeconomic factors, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children and families.

ECEC services are able to play a range of roles in forming collaborative partnerships with families and communities:

- ECEC services as family support services, or 'joined up' or 'integrated services' where families feel comfortable going to providers for help around a range of issues (Bromer & Henly, 2004).
- A combination of centre based and home based or informal ECEC.
- Partnerships with family support services including referrals or partnerships to deliver family support services in an ECEC setting.
- On-site or workplace child care.

**Table 14. Working in combination with other services**

Services were asked if they were currently working in combination with other services.

	LDC	FDC Educators	FDC Service	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>After school hours care</b>	22.4%	32.0%	49.0%	40.3%	38.1%	18.0%	23.1%
<b>Before school hours care</b>	20.9%	25.0%	45.1%	32.8%	42.9%	18.0%	15.4%
<b>Family day care</b>	1.5%	70.0%	62.7%	3.0%	33.3%	4.0%	0.0%
<b>In-home care</b>	3.0%	3.0%	13.7%	1.5%	71.4%	6.0%	15.4%
<b>Kindergarten</b>	20.9%	25.0%	39.2%	9.0%	23.8%	18.0%	30.8%
<b>Long day care</b>	28.4%	11.0%	37.3%	3.0%	28.6%	14.0%	23.1%
<b>Mobile service</b>	3.0%	2.0%	3.9%	1.5%	0.0%	2.0%	7.7%
<b>Occasional care</b>	9.0%	14.0%	19.6%	6.0%	9.5%	6.0%	30.8%
<b>Outside school hours care</b>	10.4%	14.0%	25.5%	19.4%	23.8%	8.0%	15.4%
<b>Preschool</b>	9.0%	20.0%	33.3%	4.5%	19.0%	16.0%	38.5%
<b>Vacation care</b>	25.4%	19.0%	49.0%	37.3%	19.0%	14.0%	23.1%
<b>Health services</b>	23.9%	7.0%	23.5%	7.5%	28.6%	30.0%	46.2%
<b>Housing services</b>	3.0%	2.0%	5.9%	3.0%	9.5%	0.0%	23.1%
<b>Child protection services</b>	35.8%	15.0%	41.2%	17.9%	33.3%	20.0%	46.2%
<b>Counselling services</b>	13.4%	4.0%	11.8%	9.0%	23.8%	14.0%	30.8%
<b>Disability services</b>	22.4%	13.0%	31.4%	23.9%	42.9%	24.0%	46.2%
<b>Does not work with other services</b>	34.3%	13.0%	7.8%	70.1%	14.3%	32.0%	23.1%
<b>Other</b>	6.0%	4.0%	7.8%	4.5%	.5%	4.0%	15.4%

## Forming partnerships with community organisations and services

Community organisations are often funded to deliver programs within the community, but links to early childhood services can improve their reach to an even greater number of families.

When partnering with community organisations, the role of early childhood services may vary. Services may provide information to families, make referrals to

other service or make arrangements for community organisations to deliver services in the early childhood setting.

Some specialists may offer services free of charge for families, while others will come at a cost. This can be passed on to families on a user pays basis. However, families may be entitled to government benefits to support children's access to certain health services.

As many community services do not have a specialist early childhood focus, it may be incumbent on early childhood services to take the lead to bring together relevant organisations if no other network exists.

There are a range of community organisations which early childhood services may choose to make links with depending on community needs. These might include:

- health services such as maternal and child health nurses, doctors, or health specialists
- mental health services
- family support services
- social housing services
- child protection agencies
- other early childhood services
- schools.

## Family support services

### Case Study: St Marys Family Day Care, NSW

St Marys Family Day Care, which is auspiced by Mission Australia, has 75 educators servicing the St Marys area. It is a diverse community with some low socioeconomic areas.

Belinda Attard from Mission Australia Family Day Care works as an Education Support Officer. She also provides a role in connecting families with support services. This is a key part of the flexibility provided by the service.

‘So when we have a child in care or any concerns that come to us from an educator or a family then I’ll follow through with referrals and connect to the community in that way’, Belinda says.

The service held a forum to bring together broader community organisations and new partnerships were formed to support educators, children and families.

‘We do it as a holistic approach’, Belinda says, ‘so we’ve got families that may have children in care that have a child with additional needs, [we’re] getting a lot of autism spectrum sort of stuff coming out here, so we’ve been able to connect with the Luke Priddis Foundation, with PATH in Penrith, Nepean Speech and Language, who work with us to provide us knowledge around speech screening, Positive Partnerships (Department of Education) and Aspect’.



Due to the level of community engagement the service is having, an online tool is being developed to share with educators, with information on referral services and ways to support families in their care.

‘We’re looking at giving the educators the tools to be able to refer themselves, as it is now, if they have a concern, they ring up our scheme, and make sure that we make all these connections’, Belinda says.

## Child protection

A large proportion of early childhood services worked with child protection services. This reflects the important role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in the protection of young children. However, it is surprising that relatively few outside school hours care and in-home care services were working with child protection services, compared with long day care.

While some services have a minimum commitment as mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect, other services play a more active role with child protection agencies and the out of home care system to assist vulnerable families. These partnerships are aided by Commonwealth subsidies for at-risk children to access low or no cost long day care for short periods, including Special Child Care Benefit (SCCB). Grandparent kinship carers may also access the Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB).

*We have worked together with child services to place children in foster care in our service until such time as they do not need our assistance. We also work with our sister centre to provide care for families who may find days unavailable for care in other centres in the area. We work together to try and find places for them in both systems to find a happy medium for parents.*

Nominated Supervisor, long day care service,  
metropolitan Qld

## Health services

Early childhood services commonly partner with health and disability services to provide more holistic support for families, and particularly children in early childhood education settings. Health services, including maternal and child health nurses, often deliver services in early childhood services.

*'[A] health nurse comes to centre once a month for children's checks. Disability services [are] in constant contact in regards to children with disabilities.'*

- Director, regional WA

Other common health partnerships include:

- general practitioners
- community health services
- maternal and child health nurse
- counsellors
- psychologists
- child and adolescent mental health services
- playgroups
- parent support groups
- speech therapists.

## Forming partnerships with other early childhood services

Early childhood services can work closely with other early childhood services to meet a range of family needs, particularly around the placement of children if their needs cannot be met at one service.

Situations where collaborative partnerships between early childhood services may include where there are gaps in early childhood service provision. Preschools and kindergartens and long day care services typically offer shorter hours, so families may require other early childhood services to bridge the gap in care needs.

*I provide respite care and educational programs to children in foster care, as well as children with disability. I coordinate with other agencies to optimise the effectiveness of my program. My involvement with long day care was for a child who required overnight care, I picked up the child from long day care and returned them to long day care the next day.*

Family day care educator

Some early childhood services are also licensed to deliver multiple care types enabling the services the internal flexibility to support families. This may provide families with greater options around their care needs.

## Case Study: Bright Futures Family Day Care, WA

*... the aim in the end, is to be able to make the families manage on their own. We don't want to be involved forever, and we want them to be able to sort of stand on their own two feet at some stage.*

Bright Futures Family Day Care is a local, government-sponsored in-home care (IHC) and family day care (FDC) service in Orelia, WA, on Perth's Southern outskirts. Orelia is a low socioeconomic area, with a significant Aboriginal population.

Manger, Trish Reah, and In-Home Care Coordinator, Sarah Giles, who coordinate the in-home care service say that many of the families that access the services are jobseekers or families receiving welfare payments.

The service has close relationships with mental health and other health services as well as child protection. Many of the families that access Bright Futures FDC and IHC have been referred on by these services. Bright Futures also makes referrals back to these services to provide extra support for these families.

'The working sector is not the main, I suppose, influx of our flexibility. Our flexibility is for the families that have different needs', Sarah says.

As many of the families are on the poverty line, they cannot afford to pay for the ECEC services.

'So we have to work with agencies to provide support letters in order for us to be able to apply for Special Child Care Benefit (SCCB)', Sarah says

Some families, particularly in the family day care services, use Jobs Education Training Child Care Fee Assistance (JETCCFA) to help them study, though even the co-contribution families need to pay is a barrier for low income families.

'The barriers to offering flexible services include the payment system, particularly the process in applying for in-home care funding through the SCCB', says Sarah.

'If you can just imagine a scenario, you've got a mum that's really unwell, she has a child with a disability, and every 13 weeks not much changes for that family, especially when that child is so palliative.'

Before and after school placements are the greatest unmet demand for family day care places that the service has been allocated, particularly for children with a disability. 'The availability of early childhood educators willing to take on a split shift arrangement is the greatest issue', Sarah says.

Educators who offer before and after school care also provide transport services as public transport is often not available.

In-home care educators also work with the family around their needs. At an initial meeting the educator meets the children and families, assesses the safety risks, the care that's needed, and asks about what their life really looks like—daily routines, any special needs, and what would help them the most. Sarah explains:

*You know often they're quite specific. They'll say 'Look, I just need four hours on a Tuesday and four hours on a Friday so that I can go to my counselling session and someone is caring for my child', children, whatever it might be. Some families need a lot, some families need a little. If there's an agency*

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*Case study continued*

*involved we work with them as well and sort of talk to them about what they feel is needed. And then what we then do is try and match the family with an educator that is suitable, available, has the skills that can manage that family, is flexible to initially offer what's needed and what's been identified as needed but then maybe reduce as time goes by, so that we give this family time to sort of adjust and be self-sufficient.*

Primarily the in-home care service caters for parents or children with a disability and families with more than three children under school age.

According to Trish, the key to the success and flexibility of the program at Bright Futures is the close links between the family day care service and the in-home care service.

'The nice things about these two programmes, I think, that works really well, is that as families are transitioning out of in-home care because they no longer [need it] ... perhaps [families] are starting to not meet the criteria anymore because mum's getting better, or wants to go back and work or study, or gets on her feet a little bit, well then we'll transition them in to family day care', Trish says.

In WA, all of the in-home care providers currently offer family day care which provides greater flexibility between the services.

Some families are paired with several educators to help meet the needs of the families. In one instance, Sarah recounts that three educators were helping one family to ensure that the work/life balance of the educators was maintained.

'We're pretty clear on not burning out, not doing too much, and if we feel that it's too much for one person we maybe make suggestions around splitting the care and perhaps using family day care as an option for some of the care', Sarah says.

Regular home visits are used by the service to ensure that the arrangements are working well for educators and for the children and families.

'I think the other thing is ... to support the educator when the family may not do quite the right thing. Because obviously there are certain safety standards and things in that home we have to make sure are maintained. [For example] ... the educator is concerned because there's a dog that's a worry, or unsafe things left out and they are not finding that they're managing to get the parent to hear what they're saying. Well we can support them in that because that's pretty clear', Sarah says.

Trish says the greatest improvement to the in-home care programme would be to make it more flexible to care for children whose parents are not working, and only need care for one overnight a week or a fortnight.

'You know I can think of one family I've got now and that's exactly what they want. They want a Friday night and a little bit of time on a Saturday or Sunday or something and that meets their needs and solves the stress in that family and allows them to keep on going', Trish says.

Currently, only a few families require late evening care, with some families where children have a disability requiring overnight care a few nights of the week. Educators often work during the early hours of the morning to cater for parents that are nurses or doing other shift work. Educators also often change their weekly routine for the family and what their needs are.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

'The educators are quite flexible, so one week it might be Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 5.00 am to 8.30 am, getting a couple of kids to school. The next week it might be Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, but it might be the afternoon shift until 10.00 pm', Sarah says.

For working families, the cap of 50 hours CCB is often not an issue and if more care is needed an extension can be sought from the Department of Education.

'As an example, we had a parent that fell and broke her leg. And they already had 50 hours but they needed extra because the mum couldn't weight bear on her leg for six weeks. So we just gave [the department] a bit of extra evidence from the doctor, and that was fine. They allowed us to have 80 hours.'

However, the cap of 24 hours for families not reaching the child care benefit work training study test can prove to be a barrier for the family day care services.

'Especially when you've got sessions of care, and educators are charging for ten or nine [hours] or something, so they only get two days ... some of our educators will charge eight hour days, then [families] can have three days.'

### **Tips**

- Think about the links that can be made with other early childhood services to meet the needs of families if one type of service is not meeting their needs.
- Make links with community services and organisations to support families based on their needs.
- Build strategies to support the work/life balance of educators and manage workloads, especially with extended hours care.



While some long day care centres are unable to provide extended hours directly, it may be possible to form partnerships with other early childhood services to help to meet the needs of families.

Some long day care providers have formed partnerships with in-home care or nanny services for families requiring care after hours. Other long day care centres have early childhood educators employed in the centre that are willing to provide 'in-home' care for families when required after hours. The benefit of the long day care educator model goes beyond the provision of extended hours for families.

### Case Study: Creative Play Early Learning Centre, Vic.

Creative Play Early Learning Centre in Bulleen, Victoria operates between 6.30 am to 6.30 pm, catering for shift workers and parents commuting from Melbourne's CBD. The centre is the only service in the area opening as late.

Creative Play also provides referral services for families seeking care beyond these hours through an 'informal in-home care' model.

Families are linked with educators at the centre who can provide care for children in the parents' home after hours. The centre is not directly involved, and so participating educators make informal arrangements with parents, whether it is care during the week or on weekends.

Nominated Supervisor, Katherine Vlasic says that while the arrangements are separate to the role of the centre, it provides additional flexibility for families.

'It really does build a good relationship between the educator and that family because they often become regular babysitters, their children are familiar with them, they're qualified, they have all the right credentials', said Katherine.

Katherine says that for participating educators, working informally in 'in-home care' provides an opportunity to supplement their income. For the centre it provides alternatives for a small number of families who might otherwise have to use other care arrangements.



The above model benefits children through the maintenance of stable relationships with educators. This model helps to avoid the problem of discontinuity of care arrangements, as a familiar early childhood educator continues to support the child in the family home. Moreover, these children are able to maintain access to a formal centre-based long day care setting which is preferred by many families as it may offer an approved preschool programme and/or have degree qualified early childhood teachers.

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales has recently undertaken a study suggesting 'linking in-home child care to mainstream providers—a combination of mainstream (Long Day Care and Family Day Care) and in-home child care' to improve flexibility for families (Adamson, 2014).

Currently regulatory requirements may make it difficult for providers to operate both an approved long day care service and in-home care service.

'Many families do not require full-time in-home child care, however the complexity and cost of combining centre-based and in-home child care arrangements means they have few options other than to hire full-time in-home child care.' (Adamson, 2014)

It should be unnecessary for long day care providers to be licensed for in-home care to offer services in the home. Long day care services could formally auspice these arrangements directly like a family day care coordination unit under revised licensing arrangements.

The benefits of this type of regulated approach are protections and safeguards for early childhood educators. If educators are employed or contracted



by services, not families 'this provides greater protection to the care worker, reduces the potential for exploitation (intended or not) of the care worker by the family, and provides greater quality assurance for the family' (Adamson, 2014).

The quality would be assured through the employment of early childhood educators operating under the *National Quality Framework*, including the qualification requirements. This approach was supported by peak body the Child Care Alliance which recommended to Government in 2012 that 'In-home care be attached to long day care services that can oversee quality ...' (ACA, 2012, p. 18).

Developing new licensing arrangements for long day care services to auspice in-home care educators may also help to overcome the complexity involved and bring these arrangements into the regulatory sphere. This would have the effect of boosting the confidence of parents using these services and help legitimise these arrangements for risk-averse long day care providers.

**Recommendation 15: Linking long day care services with in-home care educators attached to the service would provide greater flexibility for families while also allowing children to participate in a quality centre based early learning program.**

**Recommendation 16: Consider regulatory reform to formalise this arrangement, with subsidy reforms, to support growth of the model.**

## Flexibility and inclusion

There are strong links between inclusive practice and flexible practices—early childhood services which are inclusive support children and families to develop a sense of belonging, of being welcomed, accepted, valued and safe, without being judged.

Inclusive practice facilitates the participation of children who may be under-represented in ECEC services or whose needs may not be fully recognised and met. These include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- children in rural and remote areas
- refugee and migrant children
- children with disability and/or additional needs
- children in out-of-home care
- gifted and talented children.

Inclusive practice is often a precondition of engagement of families in early childhood services, particularly those offering family support services in conjunction with early childhood education and care, which requires a relationship of trust to be established.

### Case Study: Wonderland Outside School Hours Care, WA

Wonderland Outside School Hours Care in Duncraig, WA caters for some children with a disability including children with low functioning Autism requiring dedicated care.

The centre has found that providing ECEC for children to be a great experience, despite the challenges. However, the funding for inclusion support has been a barrier as the funding does not cover the cost of an additional educator.

'It covers 90 per cent of that staff member's wage and then there's no contribution to the rent and the ongoing costs and other costs and things like that', Centre Director, Adam Van Den Beuken, says.

Inclusion support is not provided for all children with a disability in the service. Despite this, Adam says the service is committed to supporting children with a disability and believes that it's an important service to provide flexibility for families.

### **Case Study: Northern Children's Network Family Day Care, Tas.**

Northern Children's Network Family Day Care has been focusing on developing innovative programs to support vulnerable children.

Sallie Hextall, Home Based Care Services Manager for Northern Children's Network, says that the service was funded by Calvary Community Council to start the Heads Up Program which supports educators working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

'It was aimed at strengthening family day care educators' knowledge, skills and confidence in promoting their social, emotional and mental health, and was sort of aimed at birth to four years of age', Sallie says.

One of the educators at the service works specifically with autistic children in a small group environment.

'She's very knowledgeable, and she knows exactly how to set up the environment so that it's not too overwhelming', Sallie says.

The family day care coordination unit supports educators with home visits particularly if family day care educators are having difficulty with children.

'... we have one educator that was providing in-home care for two teenage boys who were autistic, and they were very challenging boys, quite aggressive, so she managed that really beautifully ... But there was lots of support put in there as well', Sallie says.

The service is looking to expand autistic services state wide with the educator involved in training other educators about how to work with autistic children.

Children with a disability may be recognised through the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP). The program provides support through Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs), set out in the *Inclusion and Professional Support Program Guidelines* (DEEWR, 2013). However, the guidelines identify 'priority groups' with additional needs:

- children with disability, including children with ongoing high-support needs
- children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- children from a refugee or humanitarian intervention background
- Indigenous children.

The priority groups do not include all children who are under-represented in ECEC services. However, it is important that all services, regardless of whether they are engaged with the IPSP, or like programs are cognisant of all of these groups and that they are considered in the development and implementation of programs.

A framework has been developed for the inclusion of children with a disability in ECEC (ECA and ECIA, p. 5).

**Excerpt from ECA and ECIA's Position statement on the inclusion of children with a disability in early childhood education and care**

Inclusion of children with a disability requires collaboration between the early childhood education and care and early childhood intervention fields to achieve the best outcomes for children. This includes:

- leaders at all levels in the sectors working to build positive attitudes, beliefs and values about inclusion in their professional communities
- ECEC educators and support professionals working together to develop shared knowledge, common language and mutually supportive practice
- strengthening the contribution made by all members of the team, particularly focusing on:
  - the child as a contributor to their own and others' learning
  - family members as significant partners in their child's learning and as informed decision makers in supporting their child's ongoing education and care
  - cooperation between early childhood educators and support professionals in adapting curriculum and providing additional resources, based on children's and families' strengths and according to need
  - support for effective and positive transitions between and across settings for children and families.

The inclusive practices promoted by the position statement are characterised by the strong collaborative partnerships between children, families, early childhood educators and support professionals that are widely recognised as a cornerstone of high-quality inclusive practice in ECEC programs (ECA & ECIA, 2011, p. 2). These collaborative partnerships are

also features of flexible early childhood services.

The above Statement on children with a disability and the IPSP Guidelines are narrow and do not provide a framework for a vision for high-quality inclusive practices in early childhood education and care for *all* children and families. However, both of these documents provide a strong basis to develop a framework for the development and implementation of inclusive programs for all children which provide a vision for all services for the inclusion of all children and families, and improving flexible practice.

**Recommendation 17: The early childhood sector should develop a statement on Inclusion of all children and families in early childhood education and care. The statement would reflect the evidence on the inclusion of all children with a disability, and be informed by consultation with the community.**

When surveyed, many services weren't working with any other services or organisations. This suggests that while many early childhood services have formed partnerships, there is room for improvement. There may also be opportunities for early childhood services that have already formed specific partnerships to re-evaluate what partnerships would best support families in their community and look at new opportunities.

**Recommendation 18: Early childhood services should analyse where appropriate community partnerships, which may offer greater flexibility for families. This may be informed by consultation with families, and other contextual information such as the Australian Early Development Census.**

## Consulting with families

The needs of families may vary widely depending on the nature and flexibility of work and the flexibility of their family. Understanding what families' needs are is critical to designing and improving flexible services offered in long day care centres.

Regular interactions and conversations with parents help services to understand parents' and children's ongoing needs. These interactions enable services to gauge parent's satisfaction about the service and respond to any concerns.

**Table 15. Consulting with families on flexibility—services undertaking consultation**

Services delivering or previously delivering flexible early childhood education and care were asked if they undertook any consultation to better meet the needs of families.

	LDC	FDC Educators	FDC Service	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Yes</b>	25.6%	20.0%	30.0%	24.0%	35.0%	38.6%	50.0%
<b>No</b>	23.1%	37.8%	54.0%	27.0%	35.0%	15.5%	21.1%

Only a small number of services surveyed parents on flexibility suggesting that there are opportunities for greater consultation with families in service delivery.

the common form of consultation with families about flexibility of services, particularly in small group settings.

### Consultation methods

Less structured ways of consulting families such as conducting discussions with parents were

This suggests that services can do more to consult with families and gather data to inform flexible business practice.

**Table 16. Consulting with families on flexibility—methods of consultation**

Services that did consult with the community were also asked what method of consultation they used.

	LDC	FDC Educator	FDC Service	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Surveyed parents</b>	29.4%	22.2%	28.6%	27.8%	16.7%	47.8%	46.9%
<b>Market research</b>	4.5%	11.1%	7.1%	5.6%	00%	1.9%	6.3%
<b>Discussions with parents</b>	38.0%	88.9%	57.1%	40.3%	50.0%	49.0%	56.3%
<b>Discussions with the broader community</b>	16.3%	11.1%	14.3%	11.1%	22.2%	15.9%	28.1%
<b>Understanding of clientele</b>	28.5%	77.8%	46.4%	26.4%	50.0%	33.8%	40.6%
<b>Other (please specify)</b>	5.0%	16.7%	14.3%	1.4%	16.7%	8.3%	9.4%

Informal discussions are important, however a more formal feedback system ensures that comments and concerns from all parents are addressed and incorporated into the work of the service. This feedback can also be used to improve the business of delivering early childhood education and care and improve flexibility to better meet families' needs.

the service can assess the changing needs of parents accessing the service.

Short online surveys, for example, are an easy way of gathering information from all parents. These can be sent out on an annual basis or more regularly so that

New communication technologies offer powerful ways to engage others. Online survey results can be the catalyst to test new ideas about how to make services more flexible for families and test demand. Services should be aware of the risks of relying on this information, particularly if survey respondents indicate that they support greater flexibility, but actually would not use or pay for additional services in practice.

Parents can be surveyed about any aspects of early childhood services. This can be a good place to test ideas on improving flexibility to see if there is demand and if this flexible service would be used on a sustainable basis.

**Recommendation 19: Early childhood services should consult with families regularly on aspects of flexible practice such as opening times, sessions, enrolment preferences, and family support issues.**

## Parent cohorts using flexible services

Understanding which parents are taking up flexible arrangements may assist services to improve flexibility for these families.

Some services may not be aware of the specifics of parents' work arrangements and it is likely that services provided their own perception of parent cohorts using services. The relative take-up rates by different cohorts will vary depending on the incidence of these cohorts in a service's location, and the flexible model being offered.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has been examining parents' preferences for flexible ECEC as part of the evaluation of the Commonwealth Government's Child Care Flexibility Trials. However, ECA has surveyed services on the types of parents taking up flexible services.

**Table 17. Parents taking up flexible arrangements**

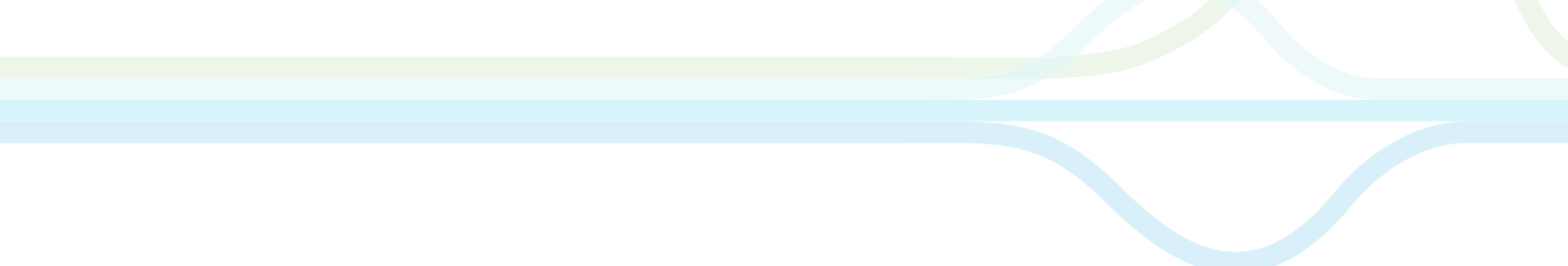
	LDC	FDC Educators	FDC Service	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Shift-workers</b>	22.0%	54.4%	74.0%	18.0%	80.0%	17.4%	31.6%
<b>Seasonal workers</b>	10.3%	13.3%	28.0%	10%	35.0%	6.3%	28.9%
<b>Parents with changing work hours</b>	29.0%	56.7%	74.0%	23.0%	85.0%	23.2%	47.4%
<b>Parents working long hours</b>	18.9%	51.1%	78.0%	9.0%	80.0%	23.2%	23.7%
<b>Jobseekers</b>	9.7%	20.0%	38.0%	4.0%	10.0%	6.8%	15.8%
<b>Families travelling long distances</b>	8.4%	13.3%	32.0%	3.0%	45.0%	11.6%	13.2%
<b>Parents in remote areas</b>	5.3%	4.4%	20.0%	0.0%	35.0%	5.8%	15.8%
<b>Parents in rural areas</b>	10.9%	15.6%	22.0%	2.0%	50.0%	15.5%	28.9%
<b>Business owners</b>	13.9%	24.4%	40.0%	5.0%	80.0%	12.1%	26.3%
<b>Students/trainees/apprentices</b>	18.7%	22.2%	42.0%	5.0%	40.0%	10.6%	31.6%
<b>Parents working in a specific sector</b>	6.1%	17.8%	20.0%	3.0%	15.0%	8.7%	15.8%
<b>Parents with additional needs</b>	13.1%	23.3%	44.0%	5.0%	75.0%	10.6%	28.9%
<b>Parents with children with additional needs</b>	20.6%	36.7%	48.0%	13.0%	80.0%	18.8%	34.2%
<b>No particular group of parents</b>	14.2%	11.1%	12.0%	6.0%	5.0%	10.6%	18.4%
<b>Other (please clarify in the comment box)</b>	4.5%	1.1%	2.0%	1.0%	0.0%	5.3%	2.6%

Parents in all situations are more likely to be taking up flexible arrangements in family day care and in-home care services. This may reflect the inherent flexibility of these services in meeting the needs of families. Long day care services are much less likely to have all of the above parent groups taking up flexible arrangements. This reflects the nature of these services and their operational constraints.

The cohort that was most often reported by services to be taking up flexible arrangements was that of parents with changing work hours. Changing work

hours might include any employment with variation in days or hours worked including part-time, casual arrangements, or changes in hours due to overtime or other arrangements.

Shift workers may also be considered to have changing hours. Shift work is characterised by rotating rosters, usually in businesses required to be open 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Shift workers made up a significant proportion of parents accessing flexible services.



Services may have reported under both categories (shift work and changing hours) because of the likely overlap between these groups.

Parents of children with additional needs took up flexible services in all services, but particularly in-home care. It is not possible to determine whether this reflects the population of children with a disability in the community and the adequacy of services provided for these children. Early childhood services have an important early intervention role in supporting children with a disability and may be funded through the inclusion support subsidy to provide support in mainstream early childhood settings.

Consultation by services, with families and the community, might reveal reasons for low levels of take-up of particular flexible services.

# Barriers to flexible practice

Early childhood services may encounter barriers which encumber flexible practice.

While some barriers to flexibility may inhibit the delivery of flexible services to families these may be overcome. At one end of the spectrum these barriers may be considered to be 'gripes', however at the other end these barriers may be 'hard barriers' which actually force services to either discontinue or not implement flexible ECEC.

**Table 18. Barriers to flexible practice**

**GRIPES**  **HARD BARRIERS**

There are a range of barriers which affect flexible practice, both general barriers and those that are specific to the care type or flexible model. Often a combination of barriers may be a factor in the services' operational decision making.

**Table 19. Barriers to implementing ECEC**

Services were asked if they encountered any barriers when implementing flexible practices and were asked to indicate what these were. They were given a list of possible barriers from which they could indicate if one or more applied to them.

	LDC	FDC Services	FDC Educators	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other
<b>Planning and development regulations</b>	15.5%	24.5%	14.6%	9.2%	21.1%	17.3%	17.6%
<i>National Quality Framework</i>	12.6%	20.4%	15.9%	11.5%	21.1%	9.4%	11.8%
<b>Family Assistance Law</b>	18.6%	36.7%	8.5%	11.5%	42.1%	14.1%	29.4%
<b>Prohibitive costs</b>	15.1%	20.4%	2.4%	1.1%	36.8%	21.5%	14.7%
<b>Wage cost/Industrial/Workplace Relations</b>	27.1%	8.2%	7.3%	12.6%	26.3%	31.4%	23.5%
<b>ECEC workforce issues</b>	26.2%	20.4%	4.9%	11.5%	10.5%	19.4%	26.5%
<b>Issues with ECEC service lease/licence</b>	10.4%	4.1%	1.2%	0.0%	5.3%	7.3%	8.8%
<b>Issues with finding suitable premises</b>	2.5%	8.2%	2.4%	4.6%	5.3%	1.0%	8.8%
<b>Lack of demand from parents</b>	17.0%	16.3%	8.5%	8.0%	0.0%	15.7%	8.8%
<b>No barriers</b>	12.9%	28.6%	22.0%	14.9%	15.8%	11.5%	14.7%
<b>Other barriers</b>	6.9%	28.6%	30.5%	2.3%	15.8%	11.5%	14.7%



## General barriers

### Lack of demand for flexible care

A lack of demand for flexible services is considered to be a significant barrier by long day care and family day care services. Without demand, the cost of inputs such as labour, may be carried by the business. For services extending hours, a lack of demand may affect overall service utilisation by increasing the total number of hours available, without an increase in children's paid hours.

**Table 20. Use of flexible services**

	LDC	FDC Educators	FDC Services	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Never</b>	2.1%	2.4%	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	2.6%	2.8%
<b>Sometimes</b>	27.6%	43.5%	44.0%	20.0%	10.5%	18.9%	25.0%
<b>Often</b>	25.6%	40.0%	50.0%	21.1%	89.5%	35.2%	55.6%

With the exception of long day care, most flexible services were used often; this correlates strongly with services that are considered to be 'inherently flexible'.

However, a significant group of services indicated that the flexibility offered was only used sometimes. In long day care services, flexible services were used sometimes more than often.

A small number of services reported that flexible services were never used.

These results may suggest that services looking to implement flexible practices may need to consider whether the model can be successfully delivered or adapted if it is only used by families sometimes.

*The cost of employing extra staff for just a couple of extra children. We cannot afford to have extra staff employed in case families need extra days, even though we have the spaces available.*

Nominated Supervisor, long day care service,  
metropolitan NSW

Demand may also be variable, making it difficult for services to anticipate staffing needs.

*I feel the greatest barrier is not all parents require the same hours of extended care. This means educators could be working very extended hours which is not appropriate for themselves or families utilising their service.*

Family day care service, regional Qld

Where flexible models increase the cost of ECEC, this may negatively influence demand.

*Flexible care is often provided to a lower number of children making it less profitable for an educator or too expensive to parents.*

Family day care service, regional Vic.

## Workforce issues

### Wage costs

Wage costs and industrial issues are immediate barriers to the implementation of non-standard or extended hours and are of particular concern for long day care services and in-home care services. This was not reflected in the response from family day care. While some family day care educators are employed by a family day care service, most work on contract with the service and have the ability to determine their own work hours and often their wages.

Under the Children's Service's Award ordinary hours are worked between 6.00 am and 6.30 pm. Overtime is paid at the rate of time and a half for the first two hours and double time thereafter (Cl. 23.2). Normal overtime rates also apply to hours worked on a weekend, including double time after the first two hours on a Saturday and all day Sunday. For services operating with extended hours, these costs are either absorbed by the service or passed onto families through increased fees.

However, employees may be classified as shift workers working early morning shift, afternoon shift, night shift, or night shift, non-rotating (Children's Services Award, Cl. 23.3). To work outside of ordinary hours as a shift worker, overtime rates continue to apply, up to 30 per cent for night shifts. While there are costs involved in employing shift workers, this option enables employers considerable flexibility to provide sessions outside of normal hours.

Notwithstanding the shift worker arrangements, employers that are not satisfied with the flexibility of the Award may seek to make an enterprise agreement which usually overrides the Modern Award, in respect of such conditions as penalty rates (Fair Work Act S57). Enterprise agreements can be tailored to the workplace, including with the objective of improving flexibility for families, while also balancing workforce concerns.

The early childhood sector does not have a significant high level of enterprise bargaining. This may be linked with the high fragmented ECEC market, with a large number of stand-alone services, poor employer

industrial capacity and unsophisticated human resource practices.

**Recommendation 20: Increase support for early childhood services to engage in enterprise bargaining, with the objective of tailoring the terms to improve the overall flexibility of services covered by the agreements.**



### Workforce flexibility

Workforce availability is another barrier which many services face. Some services find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff to fill positions.

Services find it particularly difficult to find flexible educators that are willing to work outside of traditional working hours, or work patterns.

*Most teachers and educators would prefer not to work on the early and late shifts. They all like to work around the 9.00 am to 5.00 pm times. This is more difficult as educators gain qualifications.*

Early Childhood Teacher, metropolitan NSW

In the Survey, long day care and family day care services have particularly identified workforce issues as a concern.

Work/life balance issues for educators are also a key concern. Some family day care educators are unwilling to be available 24/7 because of the strain that it put on their personal lives.

*When educators have families of their own, especially young children, offering extended flexible care to the FDC community can be very difficult. In some instances it can be difficult to assist families with their care needs.*

Family day care service, metropolitan NSW

Educators, particularly in family day care, often have their own children, and balancing their needs was also important. As a result, some services reported that they had policies supporting the work/life balance of educators.

While the flexibility of the ECEC workforce is a concern for some services, many services and educators have recognised the benefits for employees of working flexible hours.

## Family Assistance Law requirements

To receive payments from the Commonwealth, all long day care providers must be approved under Family Assistance Law. The Law provides for a range of requirements in relation to the payment of the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) and other payments to help families meet the cost of approved ECEC. The Family Assistance Law was cited by 18.6 per cent of long day care services as a barrier to implementing flexible practice.

Under Family Assistance Law, an individual may be eligible for CCB for more than 50 hours of approved care for work commitments. Services may also be approved to provide non-standard hours sessions.

Family day care and in-home care services surveyed had particular concerns about Family Assistance Law requirements. This usually related to parents reaching the 50 hour cap. Though services interviewed suggested that this was rare and could be managed with the family.

Interestingly, services suggested that caps on the number of hours subsidised under Family Assistance Law were a barrier to extending hours—though in some cases these were incorrect, such as a suggestion that CCB could not be provided for more than 12 hours a day. Further clarification regarding Family Assistance Law and maximum eligible CCB hours would assist services to better understand the flexibility offered through the family payments system.

## The National Quality Framework

There has been a significant level of focus by governments and regulators regarding the regulatory burden associated with the *National Quality Framework* for ECEC, including the *Education and Care Services National Law*.

The national regulatory system, including the *National Quality Framework*, was only considered to be a barrier to flexible practice by 12.6 per cent of long day care services surveyed. Though this suggests that any future reform to assist services to implement more flexible services may need to include guidance on how strategies can be consistent with the NQF.

## Local government planning regulations

State and local government planning and development regulations may apply to ECEC services, particularly in relation to the flexibility of services. Usually these affect new services, or established services that are varying the nature of their business. Development approval may be required to implement

flexible practices by ECEC services, particularly in residential zones.

While the regulations vary depending on the jurisdiction, particular controls which can apply include:

- anti-clustering rules
- caps on service size
- controls on operating hours.

While most regulations only specify centre based services, other regulations may apply to family day care.

*[There is a] requirement for educators to obtain Development Applications if residing on bushfire prone land or if the Local Environment Plan requires a DA.*

Family day care service, metropolitan NSW

Planning and development issues were also significant. Family day care services must apply for approval in some local government areas and meet development controls.

## High utilisation

While low utilisation may be a problem for services wanting to extend flexibility, high utilisation may also cause problems.

Flexible sessions and enrolment often requires free spaces enabling families to move in and out at different times.

Approved in-home care services which have a finite number of in-home care services allocated often find that there is greater demand for the places, than those available.

## Leadership and management capability

Working flexibly may challenge traditional operating practices and may require innovation and new approaches to dealing with issues.

Some services saw leadership and management capability as a significant barrier to implementing flexible practice.

*Rosters, accounts, staffing etcetera all take a lot more time with flexible services.*

Long day care service, Metropolitan SA

Other services were deeply committed to flexible practice and innovation, in the ethos or values of the service and sought to reflect and improve on these practices.

### Case Study: The Ranges Early Learning and Care Centres, SA

'The biggest hurdle a lot of people potentially have from the beginning is "this is the way we've always done it, so this is the way we should keep doing it." If you are of that mindset you are not really likely to succeed.'

Michael French operates The Ranges Early Learning and Care Centres across two sites in the leafy suburb of Stirling in the Adelaide Hills. Stirling is an affluent community located around 20 minutes from the Adelaide CBD with a local group centre.

Michael's recently moved his second long day care centre from nearby Aldgate into Stirling as a new Infant Toddler Centre dedicated to providing early childhood education and care for children from birth to three years old. The existing other Stirling based service is now dedicated to the older age group of children up to school age as an early learning centre meeting preschool needs.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

Michael said the decision to focus on the young age cohort was strongly influenced by the research on children's development in the first three years, and a concern that many centres may not be providing enough focus on development at this age and how to best meet its needs. The goal of the new centre is to improve quality for very young children led by degree qualified teachers.

As a result of the new centre opening, Michael also hopes to offer several new flexible models of care.

Firstly, the preschool centre will transport children a short distance between the two services to make it easier for parents to pick up siblings of different ages from the one centre.

Secondly, the preschool centre will offer an outside school hours care program for children attending other stand-alone preschools in the area. While The Ranges offers its own Universal Access funded preschool for this age, the long day care centre has vacancies before and after preschool, so Michael says it makes sense to make this service available to families at these times.

The new Infant Toddler Centre for young children has been set up to provide an central access point for community services with a drop in clinic room for speech pathologists, Parenting and Child Health Services and Child and Mental Health Services.

The centre also offers short term casual arrangements or 'occasional care' (as a long day care provider). Parents can access a minimum of a two hour session with a maximum of five hours. Fees are charged on an hourly basis and are slightly higher than the hourly rate for a full day. Michael reports families typically use these 'occasional care' places every day of the week to some degree. This would not be possible if the centre was full. As a result, the service deliberately limits permanent bookings below capacity to allow families more flexibility around sessions.

When ECA first spoke to Michael, he was also planning to embark on a three month trial of extended hours ECEC. He planned to open the centre from 6.00 am to 10.00 pm seven days per week to attract shift workers, as well as families looking for short term casual arrangements.

The rationale for this was that although staff have to have paid overtime rates, there were few other ongoing costs. To cover wage costs, the centre plans to pass the cost of overtime rates on to parents during the extended hours sessions.

Michael sees the addition of more flexible services as complimentary opportunities to strengthen both the business model, as well as providing benefits for families. He does not expect that the weekend service or extended hours will be full, but hoped to break even, and by utilising the afterhours—even creating efficiencies.

'A lot of what we are doing in flexibility, aside from meeting what parents need, is how we can make the business model more efficient', Michael says.

The children using the evening session will be undertaking appropriate activities for the time of night including having dinner and participating in quieter activities before going to bed.

Unless there is an emergency, the centre does not allow children to be in care for more than 11 hours per day, regardless of the time of day in which the care is occurs.

*Case study continued on next page*

*Case study continued*

'We are not going to have a child here from 6.30 in the morning until 10.00 at night ... it's not good for the child', Michael says.

### **Tips**

- Improve professional development in business management and gain an understanding of the economics of the business to find where the opportunities are.
- Think about how flexible services can both strengthen the overall business as well as better meet the needs of families.
- Research the demographic of families in your area, and the potential demand for flexible early childhood services.
- Assess the demand for flexible options. If there are small numbers of children utilising services outside of standard hours this still may be viable.
- Trial the flexible services for a period to test the demand from families and better understand the costs involved.
- If your service is at full capacity, consider the trade-off of operating under capacity to deliver more flexible and better quality services for the families.



## **Flexibility and cost**

Costs may be influenced by a range of factors, dependent on the flexible model being implemented. Wage costs are considered to be the highest cost, together with the cost of premises, utilisation and other factors.

The affordability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is strongly linked to improving flexibility for families. While ECEC may offer services needed by families, if it is not affordable, parents may otherwise remove children from early learning and reduce working hours to meet care responsibilities (Emlen, 2010, p. 38).

Services were asked if they increased fees as a result of implementing flexible practices.

**Table 21. Flexibility and the impact on fees**

	LDC	FDC Educator	FDC Service	OSHC	IHC	Preschool	Other services
<b>Increased fees for all parents</b>	4.7%	9.4%	4.0%	6.2%	0.0%	7.5%	5.6%
<b>Increased fees for parents participating in the flexible service</b>	5.0%	9.4%	20.0%	4.1%	15.8%	15.0%	22.2%
<b>Absorbed costs</b>	7.9%	14.1%	2.0%	8.2%	5.3%	10.5%	8.3%
<b>Costs already built into the service</b>	15.2%	27.1%	28.0%	6.2%	42.1%	14.0%	27.8%
<b>There was no cost impact</b>	16.3%	17.6%	34.0%	11.3%	31.6%	11.5%	11.1%

The cost of flexible services varies depending on the model being delivered, however the implementation of flexible practice does not always result in extra costs for families above the cost of normal service delivery.

Of long day care services surveyed, 16.3 per cent indicated that there was no cost impact on their services from implementing flexible practices and 15.2 per cent built the costs into service delivery.

Only around 5 per cent of services either increased fees for all parents and/or increased fees for parents participating in the flexible service. Family day care services and in-home care services were more likely to pass the cost of flexible services on to families.

Some services actually saw reduced costs and passed on lower fees to parents as a result of implementing flexible practice.

*We actually decreased fees when we changed our hours to suit parents' working hours.*

Director, long day care service, metropolitan NSW

Further analysis is required on the relationship between the type of flexible model offered and the cost of delivering the model.

While service types may be inherently more flexible, the costs to families can also be prohibitive, influenced by the level of subsidy available, determined by their income, ECEC usage and work status.

The cost of in-home care was considered to be a significant barrier.

*The cost of care can be prohibitive especially for families with only one or two children.*

In-home care service, regional NSW

In-home care is considered to be the most expensive ECEC type due to the general low ratio of children to staff when in-home care educators are providing care to individual families. The cost balance may quickly shift depending on the number of children being cared for, with costs for high numbers of children (below ratio) lower on a per child basis.

# List of recommendations

- Recommendation 1:** Early childhood services and policy makers should make the interests of children a paramount consideration when implementing flexible practices or policies supporting greater flexibility in early childhood settings. 15
- Recommendation 2:** Policy approaches to improve flexibility for families should address flexibility at work and in the family as well as supporting flexibility in early childhood education and care. 18
- Recommendation 3:** Early childhood services should reflect how they offer flexibility for families against the *National Quality Standard* and where quality improvements can be made to meet the needs of children and families. 20
- Recommendation 4:** Early childhood services should consider how to support children’s rights when implementing flexible practice, including giving children a voice in the development of flexible practice. 22
- Recommendation 5:** Early childhood services implementing flexible models of ECEC should consider using risk management framework, and developing appropriate risk treatment strategies, particularly in relation to the interests of children. 22
- Recommendation 6:** State and territory governments should legislate, through the COAG Education Council, to amend the *Education and Care Services National Law* to include in-home care and other out of scope services within the scope of the *National Quality Framework*. 23
- Recommendation 7:** Early childhood services be encouraged to develop digital technology plans to improve children’s outcomes and business outcomes such as flexibility for families. 27
- Recommendation 8:** Local governments should remove restrictions on the opening hours of early childhood education and care services and adopt the Best Practice *Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities*. 40
- Recommendation 9:** Support more services to offer flexible sessions under existing Family Assistance Law arrangements. 42
- Recommendation 10:** State and territory governments and non-government school authorities should develop guidelines for the delivery of outside school hours care services on school sites. 50
- Recommendation 11:** That state and territory governments, local governments and non-government school authorities explore opportunities to identify land adjacent to or on school sites for the development of co-located early childhood services. 53
- Recommendation 12:** That state and territory governments, local governments review planning policies and regulations based on the *Guidelines for the planning and development of child care facilities*. 53



<b>Recommendation 13:</b> Amend Section 47(2) of the <i>Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986</i> (the FBT Act) to lower the barriers against employers joining together to provide FBT-exempt childcare facilities to employees.	59
<b>Recommendation 14:</b> The regulations in relation to family day care educators providing in-venue care in the child's home are not clear and further clarification would be useful to services to explore this option.	64
<b>Recommendation 15:</b> Linking long day care services with in-home care educators attached to the service would provide greater flexibility for families while also allowing children to participate in a quality centre based early learning program.	73
<b>Recommendation 16:</b> Consider regulatory reform to formalise this arrangement, with subsidy reforms, to support growth of the model.	73
<b>Recommendation 17:</b> The early childhood sector should develop a statement on Inclusion of all children and families in early childhood education and care. The statement would reflect the evidence on the inclusion of all children with a disability, and be informed by consultation with the community.	75
<b>Recommendation 18:</b> Early childhood services should analyse where appropriate community partnerships, which may offer greater flexibility for families. This may be informed by consultation with families, and other contextual information such as the Australian Early Development Census.	75
<b>Recommendation 19:</b> Early childhood services should consult with families regularly on aspects of flexible practice such as opening times, sessions, enrolment preferences, and family support issues.	77
<b>Recommendation 20:</b> Increase support for early childhood services to engage in enterprise bargaining, with the objective of tailoring the terms to improve the overall flexibility of services covered by the agreements.	82

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